Fairy-Struck

Amy Sumida

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DEDICATION

This one is for all of you who have supported the Godhunter Series and made it possible for me to dream beyond Vervain. Seren exists because of you.

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Pronunciation Guide at the back of the book.

Fairy-Struck: Several types of conditions such as paralysis, wasting away, pining, and unnatural behavior resulting from an enchantment laid by an offended fairy.

Prologue

Once upon a time; isn't that how all fairy tales begin? Except this isn't your average fairy tale. There are no charming princes or wicked witches within these pages, and the fair maidens are more deadly than any big bad wolf. This is a fairy tale in the truest sense of the words; a story about fairies... the real story.

My name is Seren Sloane, and I'm an Extinguisher. That will mean nothing to you, I'm sure, so let me go back a little further. No one knows the true origins of the Fey—I don't think even the Fey themselves remember—but theories abound. One has them evolving alongside us, but where we advanced in groups—banding together to become stronger—the Fey evolved from those outcast predators who were too wild for a pack. Those who don't believe in evolution, think instead that the Fey issue from the Divine; angels fallen from God's grace. Yet another tale insists that they were gods themselves, or demi-gods; led by a mother goddess named Danu.

A final theory suggests they were not gods or angels or outcasts; merely nomads from an advanced civilization. The Scythians or Sidheans from which the word *sidhe* originates. Myths tell of these talented Sidhe coming to Ireland where they flung about their magic and generally wreaked havoc until the aggrieved locals fought back and forced the Fey to retreat into their raths; holy shrines now known as fairy mounds. History has disguised the raths as burial mounds even though originally they were thought to be royal palaces for portal guardians. Although, I cannot validate the rest of the tale I do know this; the Fey don't live under mounds of dirt. The original descriptions strike closer to the truth. The raths shrouded portals, not corpses. Hidden paths to the fairy world; a realm laid parallel to ours and not at all

underground.

Anyway, we did just fine living side by side with them until humans started destroying the environment around those entrances to Fairy. Fairies don't like it when you mess with nature and when they stroll from their magical abodes to find that mess strewn all over their backyard, they get even more pissy. So, they began to fling the mess back. All those old stories about fairies stealing babies and striking people with wasting diseases stem from this time period. Things got real bad, so bad that those of us who had the gift of clairvoyance and could actually see fairies joined together to defend the human race.

The first Human-Fey war erupted across Eire—now known as Ireland—and the losses on both sides were staggering. After the third war, a grudging truce was finally attained and councils were created to mediate between the races and support the truce with laws approved by both sides. A good start to be sure, but laws flounder and fail if they can't be enforced. Both councils conceded jurisdiction over their people to the other side; agreeing upon the penalties to be meted out should someone be found guilty of a crime. Rules for determining guilt and administering justice were set into place and military units were sanctioned to carry out the verdicts of the councils.

The Fey created the Wild Hunt. They gathered the fiercest, most terrifying of their people and trained them to stalk the shadows of our world; watching us like guardian angels until one of us breaks the law. Then the angels become devils who do much more than watch. Trust me when I say that you don't want to ever meet a member of the Hunt.

To police the Fey, we created the Extinguishers. Formed from members of the five great psychic families who originally defended humanity in Ireland, the Extinguishers inspire a fair amount of fear as well. Armed with clairvoyance as well as other talents which vary by person but can include telekinesis, pyrokinesis, telepathy, and psychometry, we also have some

serious combat skills. Most humans don't have the ability to see a fairy unless that fairy wants to be seen so every council member and extinguisher must at least possess clairvoyance. The Human Council keeps an eye out for humans with exceptional psychic abilities so they can recruit more into their fold, but Extinguishers are born into the job. I'm one of those lucky few.

Kavanaugh, Teagan, Sullivan, Murdock, and Sloane. The first five psychic families of Ireland. Over the centuries we've become a secret society so big it spans the globe; gaining strength by breeding only within the Five. This has virtually guaranteed powerful psychic gifts in our children. I'm the product of a Sloane and a Kavanaugh. Over thirty generations of contrived breeding (not inbreeding, thank you very much) have given me abilities which rank me as one of the top ten extinguishers of all time.

I was trained from childhood to become what I am; an Extinguisher, a hunter of fairies, remover of the light of the Shining Ones. Childhood wasn't horrible for me but it was definitely not what most would consider to be normal. Bedtime stories were non-fiction accounts of extinguisher heroism and instead of receiving platitudes that monsters weren't real, I was told most emphatically that they were and that when checking beneath my bed at night, I should always have an iron blade in hand. My only friends were children from other extinguisher families and every game or toy had practical purpose to it. Like the dolls my mother made me which showed what each type of fairy looked like... and had their weaknesses written on their backs in red ink.

Still, I was a child, and I knew nothing else. Life seemed magical to me; not just in the way that life is magical to all children but in a literally magic way. I was taught to move objects with my mind, create fire in the palm of my hand, and make things materialize anywhere I wanted them to (that's called apportation in case you're curious, not teleportation which is a thing of science fiction). When I got older, I was taught to fight and, finally, to kill.

Despite all of that, I wasn't raised to hate fairies. Quite the

contrary; I was taught to care for them and protect them if need be. The job of an extinguisher is first and foremost to protect the peace. We kill fairies only when they disrupt that peace and then we do it in the most efficient and merciful way possible... after we receive a warrant of execution approved by the Council. We are, essentially, peacekeepers.

That changed for my family when my mother was torn to pieces by a pack of pukas. I know; it sounds funny, doesn't it? A pack of pukas. In reality, a bunch of fairy dogs the size of ponies, with teeth sharper than a shark's, shredded the flesh from my mother, gobbled down every last bit of it, and then gnawed on her bones until they shattered them and could suck out the marrow. That reality killed all the mercy in my father and a lot of the compassion in me as well.

We immersed ourselves in the job; taking every warrant issued for criminal fairies we could get our hands on until the Head Extinguisher himself finally noticed and called us to heel. We were sent to a small territory where very little fairy crime occurred and where we were supposed to get our shit together. Most humans would love to live where we do now and when I tell you where we were placed, I'm sure you'll roll your eyes, but let me assure you that this place is a slow death for an extinguisher. Peacekeepers need a certain amount of action to keep them sane, and Hawaii has very little of that on the fairy front.

Yes; I've been exiled to paradise and for someone with my fair Irish skin, Hawaii imitates Hell in so many ways. Sure, beauty abounds and the people here embody that tropical temperament of almost Gaelic hospitality, but when you're itching for a fight, you don't want to be scratching at your peeling, sunburned skin too. Plus, the only fairies to be found—the little local variety called menehunes—frolic about causing mischief but never mayhem. Yes; Hawaiian fairies exist. Does that shock you? It shouldn't, I've already mentioned how the Fairy Realm lies parallel to ours. Fairy mounds connect more than merely Ireland to Fairyland; they form

bridges between Fairy and places all over the world. The fairies who frequent these paths seem to be influenced by the culture they cross over into.

And the fairies don't just visit. Ever since the creation of the Councils, a lot of fairies have moved into our world in an effort to support the peace. There was also the issue of the numerous entrances to Fairy which needed to be guarded. So, several fairy council members have very human jobs with very powerful positions. I think you'd be pretty damn surprised if I told you which companies secretly belong to the Fey.

We don't have any of those powerful companies here in Hawaii because, as I mentioned before, this place isn't all that important in the whole fey-human interrelations department. So, my life has become a constant preparation for a battle it doesn't look as if I'll ever be allowed to join, in a place whose beauty only feels like salt in my wounded heart. I will admit that my anger has lessened over my time here, as the memory of who my mother was slowly overshadows the memory of how she died, but for my father, this exile has only served to make him even more bitter, more vicious, and more intent on killing the entire Fey race.

Chapter One

“No way.” I looked down at the fax in my hand with amazement. “This can't be right.”

“What is it?” My dad walked into our office; his sea blue eyes narrowing on the piece of paper in my hand like a hawk who's spied a mouse.

It was a small office with just a cheap particle board desk littered with all the necessary items; a computer, a phone, a fax machine, and a copier. There was an old desk chair in front of it, a cracking plastic mat beneath that to protect the boring beige carpet, and a beat up filing cabinet to the right. That was it, and with us in the room, the tiny space was almost full. Still, it fit our needs. The office was purely for communication with the Council and for record keeping. The bulk of our work was done outside these bare walls.

“A warrant of execution.” I handed the fax to him. “From the Fairy Council.”

“The *Fairy* Council?” His narrowed gaze transformed into surprise which returned some vigor to his sorrow-lined face.

“When's the last time you saw one of those?” I asked.

“Never. To get one here is...” He looked up at me; a lock of his black hair falling over one eye. He brushed it away distractedly. He hadn't bothered with a haircut in awhile. Things like that tend to get neglected when you're on a quest for vengeance.

“Suspicious?” I lifted a brow.

“Fortunate.” Dad began to grin.

“Dad, doesn't this make you at all wary?”

“I get to kill a fairy.” He shrugged. “That it's a request of the Fey themselves is simply a bonus.”

“Maybe we should contact our council first.” I glanced at the picture that had been included with the warrant.

A willowy woman with huge mossy eyes and long hair the color of young pea pods smiled back at me. Her skin was a deep tawny umber and in combination with that hair, I knew her to be a dryad. So, she was probably a member of the Seelie Court. Not that it made any difference; Seelie or Unseelie, Light or Dark, all of the Fey were dangerous, and her sweet looks could be hiding the heart of a monster. Still—

“It says she murdered a sidhe male.” I held out my hand for the warrant, and he handed it back to me so I could read it again. “Dylan Thorn. Aren't the Thorns one of the stronger fairy families? The Unseelie King is a Thorn, isn't he?”

“Which is probably why they want this bitch extinguished.” Dad grinned. “She murdered a royal; they take that very seriously.”

“But *how* did a dryad kill a fairy royal?” I stared at the picture again. “Dryads are generally timid and their magic is low class compared to that of a sidhe, much less a royal sidhe.”

“You should know better than anyone that the amount of magic a person holds has nothing to do with their capability to commit murder.” My father was already pulling out his extinguisher gear from the little closet in the left wall.

He laid a mini crossbow on the desk and followed it up with a quiver of iron-tipped arrows and an iron knife. Guns were dangerous around fairies, even when filled with iron bullets. A lot of fairy magic was born of the elements and when fire is used in a

particular way—such as igniting all of the bullets in a gun at once—it could make a weapon explode; harming the wielder more than the intended victim.

Non-combustible iron weapons were the way to go with fairies. Something about the chemical composition of the metal reacted to their blood, and if they were actually struck with a piece of the stuff, it would burn their skin. If they were shot with an iron arrow or cut with an iron knife, the iron would poison their blood and without purification, they'd die. So, iron was the metal of choice for extinguisher weapons and when we used it in combination with our psychic abilities, we did pretty well against the Fey.

“Why aren't you getting ready?” Dad asked pointedly.

“So, we aren't calling the Human Council?” I tried one last time.

“Not necessary.” Dad strapped a specially made, flat quiver to his back with practiced movements and then layered his coat over the top as I tried to push my unease away.

It wasn't that I didn't want to kill the fairy. I would have no problem extinguishing any fairy I had a warrant for. The problem was; this warrant came from the Fey themselves and if our Human Council didn't approve of it, we shouldn't be executing. It could get us into a lot of trouble and, frankly, if this was just some high up fairy wanting someone else to do his dirty work, I'd rather not help him out.

My Dad began to hum an old Irish tune as we headed out the door. Yeah; getting in trouble with the Human Council hadn't been an issue with him for a long time.

Chapter Two

You'd think hunting fairies would be difficult. Beings with magic at their disposal and the ability to become invisible should be hard to track, but when you're an Extinguisher, you're trained to use their magic against them. All magic leaves traces of energy and when combined with the powerful aura of a fairy, the resulting glow flares up and around its host like the Northern Lights.

Still, you had to find the right sky to search in order to see those lights and tracking the murderess took most of the day. We finally found her hiding amid the crowds at Ala Moana; a massive, outdoor shopping mall on the outskirts of Waikiki. I thought it was a strange place for her to be hiding—she would have fared much better up in the mountains—but maybe she thought she'd be safer in a crowd.

“I'll circle around behind her,” my dad whispered to me. “You grab her, and we'll get her out of here so we can kill her without witnesses.”

“All right,” I agreed.

Even though most humans couldn't see fairies, when one was killed, they lost their magic; starting with their invisibility. That wouldn't be the issue with this particular fairy, though. She was completely visible; her oddly-colored hair tucked up into a baseball cap and her large eyes covered with a pair of celebrity sunglasses. That wasn't too surprising. Using invisibility magic ironically made a fairy even more visible to those of us with the sight. Magic was energy, and energy burned brightly to clairvoyants. So, if she wanted to hide from Extinguishers, using the least amount of magic was her best option. She hadn't seen me

yet, but I had no doubt that she would soon. Fairies could see Extinguishers almost as well as we saw them. All of those psychic gifts made our auras stronger than most humans.

She was sitting on the edge of a long, oval-shaped, cement planter set in the center of one of the open pathways between the shops. Plants rose up behind her and one of her hands was laid against the slim trunk of a palm tree. The Fey liked to be close to nature but that touch was a clear sign that she was scared, or at least nervous. Her slim body was hunched in on itself—as if she were pulling away from the humans sitting around her—and her lips were pressed into a thin line. A baby cried, and she flinched.

It made sense that she would be scared but, usually, a murderer has some kind of plan. They don't just sit in the middle of a group of humans and touch plants. Was she waiting for someone? Maybe she had an accomplice. This could be a lot more complicated than we'd thought. My steps slowed as I searched the area for signs of another fairy but there weren't any to be found.

I was about five feet away when her head lifted, and she looked unerringly in my direction. Her hand released the plant with a blur of movement, and she stood; looking as if she didn't know which direction to run in. I tensed for the chase as her gaze flitted over her shoulder to where I knew my father was coming up behind her. Then she took a deep breath and started walking calmly in my direction.

I was so startled that I froze for a second and a Japanese tourist bumped into me from behind. It jolted me back into action. I pulled the fairy handcuffs from my pocket and opened them with an ease won from repetition. They were iron but lined in silicone so they wouldn't burn her, just prevent her from using her magic. When I reached her, she gave me a nod and held her hands out submissively. I put the cuffs on her with complete bafflement.

“Aideen Evergreen, I have a warrant of execution for you from the Fairy Council.” I took her arm and started walking her

through the crowds. She was taller than me, as most fairies are, probably around six feet. I was five-five and although I was leanly muscled from all the training I did, I'd inherited my mother's curves and next to Aideen's willowy, fragile form, I must have looked like an Oompa Loompa.

“Asylum,” she whispered, and I jerked to a halt.

“What did you say?” My eyes slid over to her with a slow slide of incredulity.

“I ask for asylum with the Human Council,” she stated more firmly. “I have information that could lead to the destruction of the entire human race.”

“What?!” I turned to the side so I was facing her. The flow of foot traffic split around us with irritated murmurs. “Did you just say—?”

“I'm talking about the extermination of your race, Extinguisher,” she hissed. “Now, get me to your Council.”

“Yes, Ma'am.” I swallowed past the sudden lump in my throat and started ushering her more quickly through the shoppers; using a combination of telepathy and telekinesis to nudge them out of our way.

Possible extermination of the human race called for excessive measures.

Chapter Three

“It must be a lie.” Dad was driving, and we were already over the mountain; away from the heat-reflecting metropolitan montage around the mall and back to the lush, breezy, sprawling suburban side of the island.

We turned into a residential area; the bright sun flashing off the remnants of rain that speckled the abundant plant growth in front of every house. Our yard wasn't as well tended as our neighbor's but on the Windward side of the island that just means it was a bit overgrown. It rained too much there for the plants to die.

“It doesn't matter if she's lying or not,” I said for the second time. “The threat of war is enough to grant a stay of execution. The Human Council can figure out what's going on. We can't take the risk that she may be telling the truth, and we don't have the authority to make this kind of decision.”

“Not war,” Aideen interrupted as she gazed out the window distractedly.

“You said extermination.” I turned to look at her. I was sitting in the back seat of our SUV with her to make sure she didn't try anything.

“Yes, but I never said war,” she said and sighed. “Can you remove my sunglasses, please? It's too dark in here for them.”

“See,” my dad huffed.

“Dad, please.” I grimaced at him in the rearview mirror and then looked back at our prisoner. “What is it if not war?”

“Death,” she whispered as I removed her glasses, and she

focused those big green eyes on me with startling intensity. “I was part of a research team whose objective was to classify different types of poisons.”

“Poisons?” I asked as my stomach clenched.

“I had no idea that there was a purpose beyond the acquisition of information,” she continued. “Then I overheard a phone conversation between my boss and a fairy council member. We had developed a new toxin that could be introduced to plants through water. It didn't hurt the plants, but any organism which ingested them would die within days. The toxin was slow-working and left no trace of itself after the victim expired.”

“A bio-weapon,” I breathed the words out with horror. “One that humans would unknowingly and willingly consume.”

“And, as I'm sure you're aware,” she added, “the Fey own a considerable amount of produce farms.”

“So, all they would have to do is water their plants with this stuff, and humans would start dropping like flies.” I exchanged a look with my father.

“Now, you understand why they want me dead,” she whispered.

“What I don't understand is why they didn't just come for you themselves.” I frowned at her.

“Looks as if they have.” Her eyes went round and her whole body tensed as we pulled into the driveway of our little four-bedroom house.

There was an unfamiliar, black, sports car parked on the curb; right in front of our white picket fence with its overhanging foliage and—standing in surreal seriousness on the cracked cement driveway—was a bunch of fairies. They looked grim, mean, and very capable of killing whatever got in their way. They also hadn't

bothered with any glamour magic to hide their inhuman features. I cast a look around to be sure none of our neighbors had spotted them. It was very arrogant of the fairies, but I wasn't surprised by their behavior when I figured out who they were.

“The Wild Hunt,” my dad growled in a tone which barely concealed his pleasure. “Looks like I might still get to kill me some fairies.”

“So, we're protecting Aideen?” I asked, just to be sure.

“As you said”—he gave me a grin in the mirror—“we need to take her to the Council and have them sort it out. We can't risk losing her.”

“A fight with the Wild Hunt could cause political problems,” I warned him. “Not to mention the fact that it would be noticed by our neighbors.”

“And it could also be a lot of fun.” His grin widened. “I've never had the chance to go up against hunters.”

“Fine, but we're going to try talking to them first.” I transferred my grim gaze to Aideen. “Stay in the car.”

“Don't worry”—her wide eyes were focused on the fairies —“I have no desire to tangle with the Wild Hunt. I will remain rooted to this seat.”

“Great; plant humor.” I sighed. “Just answer me one more question before I go out there and kill on your behalf.”

“Yes?” She dragged her eyes away from the Hunt and set her stare back on me.

“Did you really murder Dylan Thorn?”

“No,” she said firmly. “Dylan was helping me escape when they caught us. He gave his life to ensure that I reached the Human Council.”

“A fairy dying to save humans,” my father scoffed. “Absurd.”

“Most of us like humans,” Aideen whispered. “Dylan even had a human lover. We would never want extinction for the human race.”

“All right.” I waved a hand at my father before he said anything more. “Come on, Dad, they look as if they're about to head over here if we don't get out soon.”

“Right.” He pulled his iron sword from its spot between the front seats and unsheathed it. “Let's see what they've got to say.”

We opened our doors at the same time and slammed them shut together as well; making a loud boom that echoed off our neighbor's brick wall. I walked a little behind my father; casting wary glances around us while I trusted him to take care of what lay ahead. The neighborhood held remnants of the Hunt's passage but no other traces of fairies hiding to ambush us so I focused my attention forward.

There were four hunters; two light sidhe of the Seelie Court and two dark sidhe from the Unseelie. It was pretty easy to tell the two courts apart, at least for those of us with clairvoyance. The Seelie, or Light Sidhe, had golden auras which faded to white, like something you'd expect an angel to have. While the Dark, the Unseelie, had jewel-toned clouds of energy pulsing around them. I assume that was how the terms came about, but no one knew for sure. At least, not any humans.

The dark sidhe duo consisted of one woman and one man. The woman had crimson hair; the kind of red which only looked natural on a cardinal or a rose. Or a fairy. It was pulled back into an elaborate braid which dangled down to her waist and the vivid color brought out the odd bluish tones in her pale skin. Her eyes were acid green, slit like a snake's, and when she smiled, she revealed a set of fangs.

The unseelie man had hair as black as mine but it was cut short, almost military short, which was strange for a fairy. They loved their long hair; on both sexes. Perhaps the cut was to show off the intricate tattoo he had curling around the lower part of his skull and down the sides of his neck. Stylized tree branches clutched at a pack of wolves. The skin beneath that black ink was a normal tan, but his eyes blazed canine yellow.

The light sidhe were both men. One was auburn-haired with skin like roasted chestnuts; darker even than Aideen. He had talon-tipped bird claws instead of hands and they flexed at his sides; the tips clicking together impatiently. Behind him, a pair of wings shivered; their tawny, topaz feathers ruffling with anticipation. My first thought wasn't one of admiration—although, they were pretty wings—it was one of confusion. How did he manage to get those wings in that little car?

The last man was obviously the leader. He stood a little in front of the group and held his chin at an angle which clearly broadcasted his disdain; either for us or his task. I wouldn't be sure which it was until we talked to him. His hair began as bright, platinum blond at the roots; a color so light as to almost be colorless. Then it slowly darkened, shifting through golden tones like a lion's mane; warming deliciously to caramel and then to chocolate until it hardened into onyx at the tips. Those stark ends shifted like wet ink over the shine of his armor.

Within that maddening mane was a majestic face ruled by startling silver eyes; made even more intense by a thin outline of black around the irises. Skin—pale as raw silk—covered a wealth of muscles but it wasn't pale enough to conceal a thin, silvery, curling line which trailed over the top of one high cheekbone. With those artistic swirls, the mark looked more like decoration than defect and it actually accented his eyes beautifully; making them seem to shine even brighter. Still, it was a scar; I was sure of it. One created by magic.

A scarred fairy; you didn't see that often. Most healed too

quickly to leave scars but then this was the Wild Hunt, and he wasn't just a foot soldier. He stood with the bearing of a commander but against the backdrop of my overgrown yard with its waist-high grass and our humble wood home painted a sweet baby blue, he almost looked silly. At the very least, he looked extremely out of place.

"Extinguishers Ewan and Seren Sloane?" The scarred one asked in a deep voice as he casually laid a hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Yes," my father spoke for us; his own sword laid back casually over his shoulder as if it was a Louisville Slugger. "And you are?"

"Tiernan Shadowcall, Lord of the Wild Hunt," he said tonelessly but then his wide shoulders tensed; muscles flexing enough to shift his silver breastplate, and his gaze shot to mine.

I blinked at the intensity in those strange eyes and a shiver of precognition coasted through me. The silver in his gaze seemed to warm, melt, and go liquid as a trailing tickle of fingers ghosted over my flesh. My eyelids twitched over images of his face above me; long fingers clenching in the grass beside my cheek. I inhaled sharply and determinedly pushed the vision away to focus on the present. Tiernan cocked his head and took a step toward me. I was about to move toward him as well when I realized how crazy that would be and stopped myself.

"How can we help you, Lord Hunter?" I asked as I lifted my sword and made a lie of my welcoming words. I didn't know what the vision meant; if it was a promise or a warning, an attack or... something else entirely. I couldn't think about it right then so I let the questions go and focused on the job at hand.

Tiernan stopped moving and blinked rapidly as he frowned; shifting his gaze from my eyes to my sword. He took a step back and then his eyes fell on the black SUV behind me. Those silver

orbs seemed to flash and then he began to smile.

“You've found her already.” the hunter looked back at me. “Well done, *Lady Extinguisher*.”

“Thank you.” My father stepped between us. “We've got it from here.”

“I'm afraid my orders are to return with Aideen Evergreen's body.” He finally looked toward my father. “I'll wait if you'd like to kill her yourself. I know you have a hatred that needs to be fed, Ewan Sloane. Far be it for me to begrudge a fellow warrior his share of blood.”

“I'll feed my hatred with *your* blood if you don't get off my property.” Dad edged forward, and the fairy tensed.

“Easy now.” Tiernan waved his soldiers down without even glancing at them. This was a man who expected to be obeyed. “You have the warrant of execution. We both want the same thing. Just kill the girl and be done with it, then we'll leave peacefully with her body. You won't even have to bother with the clean-up.”

“No one's going to kill her. Not today.” I edged around my father and heard his sharp intake of breath. I always let him handle business, and I never got between him and a fairy. I don't know what came over me.

“What's that, Extinguisher Seren?” Tiernan shifted his weight smoothly; his thickly muscled frame moving with the grace of one much leaner. He almost appeared to have glided sideways so that he was once more in front of me.

“She's asked for asylum,” I continued and lifted my sword higher. If he moved just an inch forward, the tip of my weapon would be directly beneath his chin. “Aideen Evergreen is now under the protection of the Human Council. Care to start a war by trying to take her?” I lifted a brow at him.

“Seren!” My dad growled.

“Do you have anything to add, Extinguisher Ewan?” Tiernan angled his gaze to my father but remained where he was.

“The girl is under our protection,” Dad snarled. “But I have no problem fighting you for her if you choose to ignore it. I won't tell if you won't.”

I nearly groaned. My father's hatred was greater than his common sense. If the Wild Hunt tried to remove Aideen from our custody after I'd just informed them of her status as a refugee, it could indeed be considered an act of war... whether or not my father was inclined to fight.

“Just leave now,” I used my pyrokinesis to cast a circle of fire around us and the SUV; forcing Tiernan and his hunters to step back. “Tell the Fairy Council that Aideen is under the protection of the *Human* Council.”

“So brave here in the light of day; surrounded by a ring of fire,” the other light sidhe hissed at me. “We'll see how impudent you are in the depths of night when death comes for you on silent wings. Just wait and see how delicious our next meeting shall be, little Extinguisher.”

“Enough!” Tiernan snapped, and the fairy went still. “We can't break the sanctity of asylum but asylum can only be invoked for political reasons, and Aideen Evergreen is a murderess on the run. That is not a matter of politics.”

“She denies the allegations.” I leveled my stare at him. “She claims that Dylan Thorn was killed while trying to help her escape from those who would murder *her*.”

“Those are fascinating claims.” Tiernan's face went pensive. “But why should we believe them?”

“She says they want her dead because she has information

about a fairy threat against humanity," I continued. "A plot to exterminate my entire race."

"She's lying of course," the lone female in their group snapped. "A desperate bid for her life."

"Perhaps." I nodded at the redhead. "But her claims are serious enough that we need to take her to the Human Council and let them decide. If they find her information to be false, we will hand her over to you."

"Hmm." Tiernan glanced over at the others. "Sounds fair enough. Which council house will you be taking her to?"

"The closest." My father shrugged.

"San Francisco?" Tiernan asked, and my dad nodded. "We shall see you there."

"If not sooner." The winged man grinned at me as they walked by; skirting the flames of my circle.

"Come by anytime," I called to him. "I'll be happy to wear those claws on a necklace and those wings will look good on my wall."

The winged fairy stopped in his tracks, turned, and started to head back over to me, but Tiernan grabbed him by the shoulder, hissed something in his ear, and then shoved him in the direction of the car. Tiernan and the two dark sidhe got into the car while Mr. *Death on Silent Wings* leapt into the air and disappeared. His shining aura flared brighter; giving away his location as he flew off.

After all signs of the winged fairy were gone from the sky, the sports car purred to life and drove away. Silver eyes flashed at me through the windshield as the car went by and another shiver fluttered down my spine. I stood with my father; staring down the street for a good five minutes after we lost sight of them before I

opened the door to the SUV and let my flames die out.

“Thank you,” Aideen said as she eased out; her cuffed hands held before her.

“Someone really wants you dead,” I observed. “Those were some serious players.”

“Yes, I know.” She cast a worried look down the road. “The one who threatened you is called Ryvel. He's known for his cruelty; even among the vicious soldiers of the Hunt. Lord Tiernan is the only one who can control him, and his team is sent after the most dangerous criminals.”

“Well if this Ryvel comes after my daughter, he'll find out what true cruelty is,” my dad said in such a calm, matter-of-fact way, it gave even me the shivers.

Chapter Four

We contacted the Human Council, and they immediately booked a flight for us on one of their private planes. I guess we'd made the right decision in keeping Aideen alive. They knew nothing of her death warrant and would not have approved it without more proof of her crimes. They also agreed with me that the whole matter was suspicious.

Aideen sat on my twin sized bed in my spartan room and watched me as I packed a bag with some clothes and essentials for the trip. She was very still, her hands clasped in her lap, but those large eyes followed my every move; like Dian Fossey studying her gorillas. It made me want to pound my chest and roar at her.

“What is it?” I finally asked.

“Have you any fairy blood in you?” She appeared nonchalant; letting her gaze wander over the bare, white walls, the arsenal of bladed weapons displayed on my dresser, the chipped bedside lamp placed precariously on a cardboard box, the stack of worn paperbacks leaning against the foot of the bed, and then, finally, myself.

“No, of course not.” I huffed a laugh as I waved my hand at the weapons; using apportation to roll them up in their fabric holder. “You should know better than to ask that. I'm an Extinguisher.”

“Yes, I know what that means but still—” She frowned and looked me over again. “The way Lord Tiernan reacted to you was odd.”

“I've stopped wondering why fairies do the things they do.”

I shrugged but my heart was racing. It *had* been odd but what was even odder was that vision of mine. It had felt—no, that wasn't possible; I could never be intimate with a fairy. Not because of my issues with my mother but simply because I was an extinguisher.

"There's always a reason behind a fairy's behavior." Aideen pulled a pair of my jeans out of my bag and rubbed her hand idly over the material. "Especially when that fairy is a member of the peerage."

"He's a royal?" I stopped and blinked at her.

The title of *lord* meant so many things in fairy culture. You called everyone from a Baron up to a Marquess, *My Lord* before it jumped up to *Your Grace* for a Duke, *Your Highness* for a Prince and then, of course, *Your Majesty* for a King. *Lord of the Wild Hunt* simply meant that Tiernan was the equivalent of a General, not that he was in charge of the entire organization. On top of that, fairy royals rarely joined the Wild Hunt; they were too busy gliding about with self-importance, doing whatever nonsense it is that royal fairies do. So, Tiernan being a peer was very surprising.

"Yes, he was a royal of the Seelie Court," she sounded hesitant and a little sad.

"Was?"

"Did you noticed his scar? It's that thin silver line on his cheek." Aideen was back to staring at me again.

"Yeah, I saw it." I turned and grabbed some underwear out of a drawer while I apportated the weapon roll into my bag. "So what?"

"So, you know how superficial the Seelie can be." She reached out and stroked a hand over my long, black braid. "He's a bit of an embarrassment to his family. Most believe that's why he joined the Wild Hunt, but whatever his reason was, he's proven to be quite good at his job and has advanced rapidly through the

ranks."

"So, his peerage didn't warrant him an immediate advancement?" I frowned and went on before she could answer. "Wait, you're saying his family is embarrassed by him because he has that little scar?"

"Yes." Aideen ran a fingertip over the delicate, diamond, star pendant at my throat. "This is beautiful."

"Thank you," I whispered; touching it automatically as I pulled away from her. "It was a gift from my mother."

"Your mother?" Her eyes widened. "Do you wear it all the time?"

"Yeah, she asked me to." I shrugged. "Plus, it reminds me of her. It's the only piece of jewelry I wear."

"What about earrings?" Aideen waved a hand toward my pierced ears.

"I used to wear studs occasionally but then I just took them out one day and never put them back in. I figured it was better to not wear anything that could be ripped out in a fight." I narrowed my eyes at her. "Why are you so interested in my jewelry?"

"Just curious." She smiled; her eyes going even wider. "Do you ever wear anything besides these thick human trousers?" She put the jeans back in my bag; folded into a perfect square.

"Sure." I shrugged. "Sometimes I wear shorts or yoga pants."

"*Yoga* pants?" She looked horrified. "You're going before the Human Council garbed as a yogi?"

"No." I laughed. "I have a little black dress for that." I pulled my only dress out of the closet to show her.

“Oh, thank Danu.” Aideen heaved a sigh. “That should do nicely. And for your feet?”

“Shoes.” I rolled my eyes and handed her a pair of sturdy black heels.”

“What are these?” She was aghast. “No, no, no, sweet, lovely, Seren. You should not wear these. Not ever. I understand that you must wear solid boots when you work but a beautiful woman should never wear shoes like these unless she's forced to.” Aideen tossed the shoes up into the air and when they came down, they were a pair of sexy, strappy, stiletto pumps.

“What the hell?” I apportated my shoes away from her. They flew straight to me. I caught them and looked them over with irritation. “I'll break my ankles if I wear these.”

“You'll be fine,” Aideen huffed. “Didn't your mother ever teach you how to dress?”

“We're not going to talk about my mother,” I growled as I tossed the dangerous shoes into my bag.

“Oh.” Her face fell. “I apologize if I said something impolite.”

“My mother was killed by pukas.” I went into the little bathroom which was connected to my bedroom and grabbed my face wash and toothbrush... while I took a moment alone to compose myself.

“I'm very sorry,” she whispered when I came back out. “Is that why your father is so... angry?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “We 're both angry.”

“Pukas,” she murmured. “Did they find the beasts' master?”

“What?” I froze; my toiletries halfway into my bag.

“Pukas never attack unless ordered to do so.” Aideen's frown shifted into a confused expression. “How do you not know this?”

“No one's ever told me,” I whispered. “I'm sure my father is unaware too or...”

“He'd be hunting the fairy responsible?” She offered.

“You're saying that my mother was murdered?” I asked in a quiet voice.

“It's a strong possibility.” Aideen went still; as if finally sensing the magnitude of what she'd so offhandedly revealed.

“But—” I sat heavily on the bed. “Who? Why? My mother was well-loved by all who knew her. There was a huge outcry over her death. Those pukas were all hunted down and killed.”

“Poor beasts,” she whispered sadly and shook her head.

“Poor beasts?” I asked; aghast.

“They were merely the weapon, Seren,” she said softly. “They knew not what they did. Would you destroy a sword if it had been used to kill her? Or would you go after the hand who held it?”

“Perhaps they were only a weapon.” I felt my face harden. “But they sure did seem to enjoy their job.”

“All beasts enjoy blood.” Aideen shrugged. “It's their nature and one cannot fault them for it.”

“But I can fault whoever was behind it.” I set my stare on her. “And I can enjoy their blood.”

“Yes.” Aideen swallowed visibly. “I believe that you will.”

Chapter Five

Night had fallen when we finally headed out the door; my dad and I both carrying luggage as well as our larger weapons. We were almost to the car when I was lifted off my feet, straight up into the air. I dropped my bag and grabbed behind me at my assailant with one hand as I pulled my iron knife free from its boot sheath with the other. I'd been taken by surprise, but Extinguishers are trained to never lose their cool in a fight, and I calmly assessed the threat as I defended myself.

There were two of them. The one on the ground facing my father was the unseelie male fairy from earlier and if the screech coming from behind me was any indication, the female unseelie was the one holding me up. This surprised me a little more. I'd been sure the next fairy attack against me would have come from that winged, seelie son of a bitch.

Wind rushed around us as I stabbed back with my knife and realized that she must have some sort of air magic. She didn't have wings so it fell to reason that she was using the air currents to keep us aloft. She was also very quick; dodging my blows with agile twists and even dropping me at one point, only to swoop down and snatch me up by my feet.

I hung upside-down as she gleefully swung me from hand to hand and started flying us away. I caught sight of the roof of my house below us and kicked upward; connecting with her knee. I heard a small crunch and she screamed as she dropped me. I had just enough time to duck into a roll as I fell; hitting the angled roof with a thud before I began to slide down it. I stopped my progression right at the edge and looked over to see my quiver of iron-tipped arrows scattered across the driveway.

I reached out a hand to focus my thoughts and mentally grab hold of several arrows, then twisted around and flung them up into the air behind me. I had timed it perfectly but still, the unseelie woman dodged all but one arrow and that one only glanced her shoulder. It was enough though, and she gasped in pain as she fell to the roof.

I stood; jerking aside as she slid past me, but her hand snaked out and caught my ankle; pulling me with her. The edge of the roof dug into my back as I was yanked across it, then the back of my head hit it hard as I was lifted into the air once more. I tried again to reach her with my dagger, but she was moving too fast. I gave up and lit her clothes on fire instead.

Whoosh. A second and she went from sleek, midnight assassin to flaming marshmallow. The rush of her air magic quickened the fire's pace; sending it up and out, away from me and into her beautiful hair. She gave a fox-like shriek and let go of her magic while admirably holding onto me.

I put out the flames as we fell and lunged upwards; rolling her so that when we hit, she was beneath me and took the brunt of it. We hadn't fallen very far, but I heard the hollow crack of something within her chest. The fairy looked up at me; eyes tight with pain and hatred as I placed my dagger against her throat.

“Why would you disobey a Lord of the Wild Hunt to attack us?” I nearly shouted at her. “Tell me!”

“I do not truly answer to him,” she spat as blood started to trickle from her lips. The iron in her shoulder wound was already traveling. It must have struck deeper than I'd thought.

“Who then?” I pushed the blade harder against her throat and her flesh began to sizzle. She screamed but then pressed her lips firmly together. “Who?” I dug my knee into her stomach.

“Seren.” My dad was behind us, which meant the other fairy must be dead.

“Give me a minute, Dad,” I growled and pulled the blade away so the woman could speak.

“You have no idea who your enemies are.” The fairy began to laugh insanely. “You should fear the darkness, Extinguisher!”

Her laughter was so unsettling that I actually drew back so that I was straddling her hips. Her braid now ended just below her ears; a frayed, burnt, bloodstained rope. Her clothing was nearly gone, just the leather armor remained; blackened in waves mapping my fiery attack. Patches of her skin were just as black; some cracking open to reveal the red flesh beneath. All of that, combined with the blood at her lips and shoulder, made her appear half-dead. Like a witch who'd been saved from the fire only to be taken by insanity.

The laughter ended abruptly as blood splashed up from her neck and slapped my cheek. I flinched a little and looked up at my father as he yanked his sword out of the ground. He'd struck so hard that the iron had embedded itself in the earth beneath the fairy's neck.

“She could have given us important information,” I nearly shouted at him.

“She wasn't going to give us anything,” he said grimly as he shook the blood and soil off his sword with a quick movement.

“Perhaps we should leave now?” Aideen asked in a small voice.

“We'll have to take the bodies with us,” I grumbled as I got to my feet.

I was angry with my father but a little surprised that my anger wasn't over the fact that he'd stolen the kill from me. Not too long ago it would have been, but now, I was angry because the death had been wasted. Perhaps I really was moving on from my mother's death, or perhaps it was all due to the fact that Aideen had

given me a key bit of information. Mom's death hadn't been random; it had been murder.

Murder made sense of my revenge. It gave it purpose and direction. All I needed to do was find something or someone to point me toward the killer and I'd know where to place my next step. I just wasn't sure if sharing that move with my father would be a good thing or not. It could give him some clarity as it had me, or it could remove the last bit of his control and drive him completely over the edge.

The crack of a tarp thrown open sounded like thunder in the suburban silence, and I turned sharply to see my father spread the bright blue plastic in the back of our SUV. He strode over to the body of the male fairy with jaunty steps. His job was much easier than mine since his corpse was cut up into manageable pieces. I grabbed the fairy woman's foot and started to drag her over the pale cement; leaving a wide swath of blood behind me. I sighed; wondering if it would stain and if we even had the time for more than a quick spray of the hose to cover the evidence of our victory.

Aideen stood to the side; watching it all with wide eyes and shaking arms crossed over her chest. I didn't have the time to comfort her, wasn't even sure that I knew how, so I passed by her with a down-turned gaze and didn't look up until I'd reached the back of the car. Dad gave me a Cheshire Cat grin as he threw an arm onto the tarp. It landed with a crinkly thud, and I grimaced.

No, it wouldn't be wise to include him just yet.

Chapter Six

“Why did she grab *me*?” I asked from the comfort of my large, black, leather, airplane seat.

“What's that?” My father was making his way back from the black lacquer bar at the far end of the cabin. He handed me a glass of soda as he sat across the aisle from me in his own luxurious chair.

“Well, if their mission was to kill Aideen, why didn't that fairy scoop Aideen up into the air?” I frowned as I recalled the attack. Now that we were relatively safe inside an airborne plane, I could think more clearly.

“You were blocking me I guess.” Aideen shrugged.

“No, I wasn't.” I chewed at my lip. “You were between me and Dad, but she could have easily picked you up instead of me. Why take the risk of attacking an extinguisher when she could have simply killed you and been done with it?”

“That is strange.” My Dad started to frown; his eyes shifting around as if he were searching for an explanation.

“Maybe they don't want me dead anymore.” Aideen gave us wide, panicked eyes.

“Don't worry, they're not going to get you,” I reassured her. “Dad called the San Francisco division of the Human Council, and they'll be meeting us at the airport with a large group of Extinguishers to escort us to the Council House. Once you're there, you'll be completely safe. Nothing can get past the Council's wards.”

“Thank you.” She sighed and sank back into her chair.

There were lines of strain around Aideen's eyes and lips. Her shoulders drooped, hunching inward, and there was a tremor in her right hand. It made me wonder how long she'd been separated from her tree. Dryads lived in trees; great big ones that were hollow on the inside. They had a sort of symbiotic relationship with their home; their magic fed the tree while the tree helped to sustain them. It was a constant exchange of energy and the further away a dryad was from her tree, the less energy could be exchanged. Both could die if they were separated long enough.

“How long have you been away from home?” I asked her.

“Not that long.” She looked up at me in surprise. “I was just there a few days ago. There's a mound close to work.”

“Why didn't you just flee into Fairy?” My Dad asked suddenly.

“Because I needed to tell your council about the poison.” Aideen gave him a confused look. “That was the whole point.”

I glanced at my Dad and saw that he was baffled. Even though he'd bought into this idea that Aideen had some important information, I don't think he comprehended that she was doing a good thing for the human race. Us. A fairy was trying to save us at the risk of her own life. It was inconceivable for him, and I completely understood why. Since Mom had died, we'd both villainized the Fey and the idea that one of them could actually do us a kindness was hard to process.

“You're very brave,” I spoke into the silence.

“I'm just doing what I believe to be right.” She shrugged. “Life is precious.”

“Some more so than others,” my father grumbled before he took a long swig of whiskey.

Chapter Seven

The Human Council House in San Francisco was actually a composite of two Victorian homes which had been built so close together they were practically touching. The Council bought them and had the inner walls on the first floor torn down so they could be joined together in truth. I'd always thought the joining part was unnecessary since the council chambers weren't in either house at all but below them.

We'd been met on the runway by a contingent of Extinguishers, all clad in black, modern, body armor accessorized with crossbows, iron swords, and reflective sunglasses which made them look like a bunch of post-apocalyptic mercenaries. As soon as the steps lowered, they had rushed forward in that military hustle I've done myself on several occasions and formed a passage for us. They faced outward—bodies tense like foxhounds searching for a scent—as we raced down the stairs; Aideen between my dad and me.

The Extinguishers closed in smoothly behind us as we went; ushering us into the back of a large, black SUV (we Extinguishers like SUVs) and then we were driven directly to those conjoined Victorians. Another Extinguisher tunnel was formed and we raced through it again; right up the steps and into the council house. I barely had time to appreciate the filigree architecture or the lush blooms of the fenced-in garden in front of the house. Our escort didn't even pause when we made it past the front door but led us straight back through a narrow foyer. I had glimpses of elegant old world decor through open doors to our left before we were herded into a very modern looking elevator.

A button was pushed for the lowest floor as well as the one

above that. There were three levels beneath the house and the whirring elevator carried us smoothly down to the second. That was where two of our extinguisher guards got out with our luggage and weapons.

“We'll leave these in your suite,” one of them said over his shoulder as he left.

“There goes changing into my dress,” I murmured to Aideen and then did a double take.

She was cringing beside me like a woman heading for the gallows. I placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her. Her eyes flicked over to mine and then settled. She took a deep breath and gave me a grateful smile. I had no idea what she was going through but being enclosed in a little metal box with a bunch of extinguishers couldn't have been comfortable for her.

We went down one more level and then stepped out of the elevator to follow our remaining escort down a long, white, empty hallway. There were closed doors to either side of us with brass nameplates on them. The offices of the councilmen and women. We went past all of them, straight to the door at the very end; directly opposite the elevator. Our escort opened the door and stepped aside; revealing a large room with soft green walls adorned with several expensive paintings. I could tell they were expensive because they had ornate, gilded frames and little spotlights over them. People didn't put spotlights over cheap prints.

The carpet was meadow-green and very plush; complimenting the assortment of potted plants around the space. A series of teardrop shaped lights hung down the center of the rectangular room; illuminating an oval, mahogany table. There was a carving of a candle snuffer in the center of the table with Celtic knotwork surrounding it and the words “Riamh Eagla an Dorchadas” beneath it. The symbol and motto of the Extinguishers.

“Never fear the darkness,” I whispered as I translated the

Gaelic to myself. The last words of the female hunter came back to me then; her cackling voice advising me to do exactly the opposite. What the hell had she meant by that?

"Good advice," Aideen whispered back to me with a smile as she absently reached out to stroke the leaf of a potted plant. For a second, I thought she was referring to the unseelie fairy's words but then I realized she'd meant the motto.

"Ms. Evergreen?" A man with graying brown hair but a very physically fit body straining his tailored suit, walked over to Aideen with his hand extended. "I'm Alan Murdock, Head of the San Francisco Council House. I know you must be frightened so let me take this opportunity to thank you for your courage and assure you that we will do everything within our power to keep you safe."

"Thank you, Mr. Murdock." Aideen shook his hand. "I admit that after the unseelie attack, I was pretty shaken."

"Yes, we've heard about that." He gestured to the table, and we all settled into seats around it.

Councilman Murdock took the seat at the head of the table and placed Aideen beside him on his right. Aideen grabbed my hand and pulled me into a seat next to hers; leaving my dad to follow us and take one on my right. I settled into the soft-green, leather cushion and leaned back with a sigh of relief. We'd made it; Aideen was safe. That's when I looked around the table and saw *him*.

"What are *you* doing here?" I blurted, and everyone went quiet.

Tiernan Shadowcall, Lord of the Wild Hunt, lost his cool, blank expression for just a moment as his lips twitched. Then he lifted his chin along with one perfect, blond eyebrow. It appeared to be all the answer I was getting from him.

“Count Tiernan has asked to join our investigation,” Murdock answered for the fairy. “And we're very happy to have him,” the last was said with a bit of force and the Head Councilman's gaze fell hard on me and my father.

All I got from the exchange was that Blondie was a Count. Seriously? A Count? That was a fairly impressive title; somewhere between a Baron and a Marquess. Not at all what I'd been expecting when Aideen said he was a royal. A Count definitely didn't belong on the Wild Hunt. He should be parading about some fairy estate in fairy finery, petting his fairy dogs and painting sparkles in the air or whatever silliness fairy royalty did. My thoughts must have shown on my face because the Count gave a slow blink as his lips twitched once more.

“I've investigated Aideen's claims, and I, as well as the West European Fairy Council, have found them to be worth further inquiry,” Tiernan said... directly to me. “The Council has ordered me to protect Ms. Evergreen and see this through. We do not want a war with you humans.”

“Could you say 'you humans' with just a little more scorn please?” I smirked at him. “It wasn't quite obvious enough.”

“Extinguisher Seren!” Murdock snapped.

“What?” I asked excessive bafflement.

“My apologies for any misinterpreted sleights,” Tiernan offered with snobbish gallantry.

“That didn't sound like an apology,” I muttered.

“You're very welcome here, Count,” Murdock spoke over me.

“Dracula,” I added under my breath.

“What was that, Extinguisher Seren?” Murdock pinned me

with his gaze.

“Nothing,” I said innocently. “I was clearing my throat.” I said it again, “Dra”—cough—“cula.”

“I've never in my entire existence drunk blood,” Tiernan protested with a little smile.

“Your skin's pretty white though, and I bet you've impaled a few people.” I lifted my brows at him.

“I suppose you could call it impalement. Would you care for a demonstration?” His look turned lascivious, and my cheeks heated.

“What did you just say to my daughter?” My father's voice went low and dangerous.

Tiernan only grinned wider; keeping his startling gaze fixed on me and my red cheeks.

“That will be quite enough of that!” Murdock's glare went back and forth between Dad and me. “Not that it matters. Both of you will be heading back to Hawaii shortly.”

“Now, wait one minute,” my father growled.

“I'm sorry, Ewan, you're both still too unpredictable for this mission,” Murdock said with a fair amount of sympathy. “This is too important to compromise with your bias.”

“We were the ones who found Aideen and brought her to you in the first place,” I protested. “If we were biased, she'd be dead.”

“Councilman Murdock,” Aideen interrupted, and we all looked at her in surprise. “I must insist on Seren as my personal guard. Frankly, I trust her, and I won't be comfortable with anyone else.”

“Well.” Murdock blinked at her and then at me. “It looks as if you've snagged a spot on the mission, Extinguisher Seren.”

“Then I stay as well,” Dad growled.

“You can stay, of course.” Murdock waved a hand. “But I'm afraid my decision stands; you won't be helping us any further.”

“This is bullshit,” Dad growled.

“Extinguisher Ewan, we appreciate you bringing this problem to our attention,” Murdock started to dismiss my father.

“Fuck no, Alan!” Dad stood and slammed his fist onto the table. “I deserve this chance to get back into the game. I can handle myself.”

The room went silent for the space of three breaths and then Murdock finally spoke, “Sit down then, Ewan, and begin by showing me a better temperament.”

“I can stay?” Dad cocked his head at Murdock.

“I already said you could stay. Now, sit your stubborn ass down!” Murdock shouted, and Dad sat. “You will not be on the mission, Extinguisher Ewan. You can help in an advisory capacity, but that is all.”

“Murdock,” my dad growled.

“*Councilman* Murdock,” Murdock corrected my dad with a dangerous tone.

“Councilman Murdock,” Dad amended and sighed. “I have served this council for most of my life. You owe me the chance to redeem myself.”

“Do you know how many fairies you and your daughter have killed in the last two years, Extinguisher Ewan?” Murdock

asked calmly.

“No,” Dad admitted; adjusting his shoulders like he did whenever he got nervous.

“Thirty-six,” the councilman said, and I watched Tiernan's eyes widen just slightly.

“All with warrants.” My father's jaw was clenching. “All of them were legal extinguishes.”

“Yes, but they weren't all *your* warrants.” Murdock sighed. “You used your rank to commandeer executions from lower level extinguishers so you could take out your rage on those fairies.”

“They were criminals.” Dad frowned. “All were slated for execution; there's nothing wrong with what we did.”

“That you can't even see the problem, is a problem.” Murdock shook his head. “We don't enjoy killing. We extinguish convicted fairies humanely.”

“When someone behaves like a beast, he says, 'After all, one is only human',” my father quoted. “But when he is treated like a beast he says, 'After all, one is human.'”

“Using wit to twist my words won't help your cause.” Murdock narrowed his eyes on my father.

“I'm not.” Dad sighed deeply. “I'm telling you that I made a mistake. That's it's an easy line for us to cross; to go from killing *humanely* to simply killing. I'm angry and yes; I'm out for fairy blood, but I'm also in control of my actions again.”

“I will allow you to advise on this mission; no field work,” Murdock said again. My dad started to protest, but Murdock held up his hand. “If you display this reclaimed self-control and reason, I will have you reinstated to a proper position and move you back to San Francisco.”

“That's fair,” Dad agreed. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Murdock said stiffly and then turned toward Aideen. “Now, please, Ms. Evergreen, tell us exactly what you know.”

Aideen seemed to know quite a bit about the biological weapon as well as the plan to deploy it and it took over three hours to get it all out of her. Then another two to work out a plan on what to do about it. Finally, we decided to infiltrate the lab Aideen worked at... with her help. She said she knew where they kept a sample of the poison, and she was willing to personally lead us into the lion's den if we could get her past all of the guards.

I was surprised by that. After seeing her friend murdered as she tried to escape, the thought of going back into the lab must have been terrifying. Yet Aideen was willing to return to make sure his death wasn't for nothing. I have to say, I was growing more and more impressed by her. She was one brave dryad.

Chapter Eight

“Brendan is here,” Councilman Murdock said to me on our way out of the council chambers.

“Oh?” I lifted a brow politely.

Murdock's son and I had been friends when we were kids, but I hadn't seen him in years. All extinguisher children had to go to normal, human school as well as take extinguisher classes. Physical training was done by the parents but the educational classes on fairies and their culture were taught by the Councils. I'd attended the same Council school as Brendan had; the San Francisco school. That was back when my father and I had lived in SF and Mom was still alive. The thing was; Council classes ended at age fourteen, and Brendan and I hadn't exactly kept in touch since then. I wasn't sure why his father was bringing him up to me now.

“I thought this might be a good opportunity for you two to catch up?” Murdock offered as he stepped aside; opening the door to his private office and going in so the rest of the council could get past us.

I followed him inside since we seemed to be having a conversation. Although, I didn't know what to say next. A glance around the room showed a classy, polished, oak desk placed directly in the center of a Persian rug. There were tall bookshelves lining the walls behind and to either side of the desk; leaving only the wall with the door open to display photographs of the councilman shaking hands with various political figures—including several presidents.

“Are you and Brendan old friends?” Aideen asked sweetly.

She had followed me in.

“We were friends when we were young.” I frowned first at her and then at the councilman.

“Uh, I haven't mentioned it to her yet.” My father came into the room and closed the door behind him; giving me a nervous glance.

“Oh!” Murdock chuckled. “Sorry about that. I guess I let the cat out of the bag.”

“I don't like that expression much,” I said as I turned to glare at my father.

I had a feeling I knew what this was about. Extinguishers had been marrying other Extinguishers for generations; resulting in extremely powerful children. I had personally benefited from this, being one of those powerful children, but that didn't mean I liked the idea of being forced to choose a husband from a select group of men. I wasn't ready for marriage. I was only twenty-six. Didn't women get married a lot older these days? We lived longer now and that meant we had more time to decide on a husband. Plus, the idea of having children simply scared the bejesus out of me. I had a fish once and it hadn't lasted a month. A *fish*. How was I going to take care of a baby?

“Brendan's a good man,” my Dad started, and I rolled my eyes. “Just give him a chance; that's all we ask.”

“Why would you want your son married to me?” I looked back at Murdock; hoping for some help. “You yourself called us unstable. Why would you want me in your family?”

“You'll recover,” Murdock said with a gentle tone. “What you two went through was a nightmare. It's totally understandable to lose your calm, but I happen to have known your father for quite a long time so I can say with the utmost certainty; the both of you will be just fine. You're stronger than this pain.”

“Stronger.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “This is about my test scores, isn't it?”

“You're the most talented female extinguisher there has ever been.” Murdock nodded; completely shameless about it. “Telekinesis, pyrokinesis, levitation, and clairvoyance. All at very impressive levels and then you tested high in the fields of combat as well.”

“And I have a touch of precognition,” I added with a grimace. “Though I'm not very good at that one.”

“Yes, you have a bit of the oracle inside you.” Murdock smiled. “Having you for a daughter-in-law would be an honor.”

“And the fact that your son is one step above me with his combat scores doesn't hurt either, huh?” I looked back and forth between the two smiling fathers. “Look at you guys; I can practically see your dreams of ultimate warrior babies flashing in your eyeballs,” I huffed and walked out of the room; Aideen in tow.

“Seren,” my Dad called after me.

“Let her go,” I heard Murdock tell him. “She'll cool down and realize we're right.”

“No, I won't,” I growled as I barreled down the hallway and straight into the elevator with Aideen.

I jabbed the button for the second level, the residential floor; knowing that I'd have to check in with the housekeeper to find our room. I was still irritated when the elevator doors dinged open, and I stormed through them without looking... ending up smack dab against a solid chest. I backed up—even more annoyed —to glare up into a handsome face.

“Brendan,” I spat in accusation.

“What did I do?” He pulled back with wide, blinking eyes.

“Your father and Seren's just informed her of your possible nuptials,” Aideen explained merrily.

“They what?” Brendan's ultramarine eyes widened and the muscles in his broad shoulders flexed as his head pulled back even further.

It was hard to ignore the significant physical changes Brendan had gone through since last we met. No more lanky limbs and hollow chest; now he had sleek muscles and a confident bearing. His face had formed new angles; interesting lines at jaw and nose which made up for the almost non-existent thinness of his lips. There were thick lashes around those blue eyes and thick, auburn hair around that new face. Too bad our fathers' interference soured all that. Yeah, I was that person; push me one way, and I'll head in the opposite direction.

“Yep,” was all I said to him. “And it's not happening.”

“No problem,” he huffed and angled out of my way.

“What?” I narrowed my stare; unsure whether I should be insulted or grateful.

“Well, what did you expect me to say?” His lips pulled back in distaste. “Yeah, I've always liked you, and I may have mentioned that to my father. I may have also seen a recent picture of you and suggested to my dad that he talk to yours about a possible... whatever.” He shrugged. “But if you're not into me, that's fine. I'm not going to chase you around; begging you to give me a chance. I'll look elsewhere.” He turned to leave.

“Hold on.” I sighed, and Aideen grinned at me. I knew he was using basic reverse psychology on me but it still worked. As I said; push me one way, and I'll go the other. I needed to work on that.

“Yes?” Brendan turned around; sporting the wry smile I remembered from my childhood.

“I didn't mean to insult you; I was just pissed at being blindsided.” I grimaced. “It's good to see you again, Brendan.”

“It's good to see you too.” He gave me a charming grin. “And I understand about the whole matchmaking thing. That might have pissed me off too, but it's kind of our culture. I mean, weren't you raised to expect something like this? At least now we have a choice; it used to be arranged marriages. You were set up by your parents and that was that.”

“True.” I bobbed my head. “But I don't know if I'm ready for marriage yet.”

“We're both older than our parents were when they got married.” He gave a slight head toss/shrug.

“We haven't seen each other in twelve years and yet you already want to get married?” I gaped at him.

“Hey, now!” Brendan held his hands up. “I said I was interested in getting to know you better, not that I wanted to put a ring on your finger.”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Okay then.”

“Okay then?” He lifted his brows. “Does that mean you'll go out with me?”

“Uh.” I blinked some more.

“Look, some of my friends and I are going out to an extinguisher club tonight. Why don't you come along?” He offered. “Just as friends so we can get reacquainted.”

“I can't.” I jerked a thumb at Aideen. “I've got to protect our witness.”

“Oh, right.” Brendan looked over at her. “I heard there was some major stuff going down.”

“I'll stay here with your father,” Aideen offered.

“You want to stay with my father?” I set wide eyes on her. “Just the two of you?”

“Sure.” She shrugged. “He's not going to hurt me, Seren. He knows I'm important.”

“Yeah, but he's not going to be pleasant company either,” I warned.

“He will be if you tell him I'm the one who made it possible for you to go out with Mr. Murdock here,” she suggested.

“You sassy little minx.” I laughed. “All right then, we'll get you settled first.”

“I already know which room you're in.” Brendan grinned unabashedly. “How about I come by and get you in about an hour?”

“All right.” I grinned back, and I had no idea why. Hadn't I said this wasn't going to happen?

Chapter Nine

Aideen had been right. Dad was so thrilled by the idea of me going on a date with Brendan that he started treating Aideen as if she were his long-lost sister and not an evil, murdering fairy. It was a shocking turnabout for him, but one that gave me some hope. If he loved me more than he hated the Fey, then he wasn't entirely lost.

I know that sounds obvious—that no one should hate anything more than they love their daughter—but you just don't understand hatred if you think that. I had been just as consumed as he was, and I can honestly say that love could not have swayed me from my vengeance. I would have understood and even supported my father for hating the Fey more than he loved me back then. Now, however, after exile in paradise and with the addition of Aideen's crucial information, I was slowly letting go of my blind rage. Although, it was being replaced with a new type of anger; one colder and more devious but which also left room for reason. It made no sense to hate an entire race for the act of one person. So, I would focus my anger and condense it into a blade which I would use to give my mother justice.

See; I was doing much better now.

“No discussing that thing about the beasts and their masters,” I whispered to Aideen as I headed to the door of our suite to answer Brendan's knock. I didn't want her mentioning anything about the pukas to Dad.

“Beasts?” She frowned and then her face cleared. “Oh, right, no beastly talks. You got it.”

“Thanks. I need to find a gentle way to tell him.” I glanced

over to where my father was rushing out of his bedroom.

“Is that him?” My father asked with a grin. It was the happiest I'd seen him in years.

“I think so.” I rolled my eyes and opened the door to find Brendan standing there; looking unbelievably delicious in a pair of worn jeans and a dark green dress shirt. The top two buttons of his shirt were undone; showing a glimpse of tanned skin with a sprinkling of hair. I wasn't a big fan of hairy chests, but it looked good on him; enough so that I was starting to have hopes for the evening.

“Hey, Seren, you ready?” He asked and then his eyes went wide when he saw the little black dress I was wearing. His gaze skimmed down my legs to the heels Aideen had transformed, and he blinked slowly before returning his attention to my face. “You look amazing.”

“Thanks.” I grinned and glanced over to see Aideen smiling smugly.

“Extinguisher Sloane.” Brendan held out a large hand to my dad, who rushed forward to shake it. “I'll have her back before dawn.”

“Don't worry about it, Son.” Dad beamed, and I groaned.

“He's not your son,” I said.

“Not yet.” Dad winked at me.

“I'll try my best, Sir, but your daughter is quite formidable,” Brendan said and then laughed.

“You're telling me.” My father rolled his eyes, and I realized that I must have picked up the habit from him.

Great, and I probably looked just as obnoxious when I did it.

“Take care of Aideen,” I admonished him.

“Yes, dear,” Dad intoned like a harassed husband as he shoved us out the door. “Don't come back until you're engaged.” The door slammed behind us.

“So, no pressure there.” I grimaced at Brendan, and he chuckled.

“At least I won't have to worry about convincing your father that I'd make a good son-in-law.” He led me through the hallways and took us up in the elevator.

We exited the council house and went down the steps to the curb where a group of young extinguishers waited beside a sleek, black limousine. I raised my brows at that and gave Brendan a look.

“It wasn't my idea.” He held up his hands.

“It was mine!” A beautiful redhead launched herself at me.

“Abby!” I shouted in surprise as I caught her.

“Brendan told me about his little crush, and I may have talked him into a bigger one.” My old friend grinned as she pulled out of the hug.

Abby had gone to school with us, but she had also attended regular, human high school with me. Brendan had been sent somewhere else since he lived in a different district. So, Abby and I had known each other until graduation and *had* kept in touch; right up until my mom's death when revenge became more important than friendship.

“You tricksy, tricksy hobbit,” I teased her, and she laughed. “Believe nothing this woman tells you,” I shot back at Brendan. “She is not to be trusted.”

“Funny.” Brendan grinned as he opened the limo's door for

me. “She said the same thing about you.”

“Oh, well in that case.” I shrugged. “It's all true.” I laughed along with Abby but instead of getting into the limo, she pulled me over to meet the rest of the group.

“This is Claudine.” Abby waved toward a tiny woman with a fashionista, blonde bob. “Matthew,” a swarthy, cookie-cutter example of sturdy extinguisher stock. “And my boyfriend, Jared,” as beautiful as the rest but with dark, serious eyes that made me pause.

“Hey, everyone.” I nodded; looking quickly away from Jared's intense stare.

They all gave me warm welcomes and then we piled into the car. It was spacious and had a stocked bar so we stretched out across the leather seats; dividing into couples before we started drinking. Except for Abigail who sat her perfect butt right beside mine and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“I've missed you so much,” she said. “How dare you leave me to go bask in Hawaiian sunshine all day while I'm here chasing after errant fairies and freezing in the cold breeze coming off the bay?”

“Hawaii is gorgeous,” I agreed, “but boring. So very boring.”

“What about the beach?” Claudine asked.

“Have you seen my skin?” I held out one pale arm. “I'm like a vampire.”

Then I frowned as I remembered the Dracula comment I'd made about Tiernan. Yeah, people in glass houses definitely shouldn't sleep naked. Or something like that.

“Oh, I hunted one of those last week.” Matthew chuckled

as he slid an arm around Claudine's shoulder.

“Not exactly humorous.” Jared frowned at Matthew. “That baobhan-sith killed four men before we caught her.”

“Matt didn't mean to make light of it.” Abby patted Jared's knee.

“She killed four men?” I leaned forward to speak to Jared. “How did she get away with so many?”

“She tore up the bodies afterward.” Jared shook his head as he leaned forward too. “Then she dumped them in the bay. We were only notified when the parts started to wash up on the shore, and then we had to use a psychometrist to discover what had happened.”

“Damn, I wouldn't want that job,” I whispered. “First, you have to touch all those torn up bits and then you have to relive what happened to them.”

“Yeah, that's why they get paid so much.” Jared shrugged.

“More than us?” Abby asked him, and he nodded. She frowned.

“I wonder how many other kills we've missed because of something like that.” I slid my gaze back to Jared.

“That's what I said.” He nodded to me.

“Downers.” Claudine sighed dramatically. “We're not talking shop tonight.”

Jared and I exchanged an annoyed look, and we both sat back against the leather cushions with matching sounds of irritation. So, I guess his intensity was intimidating only because it reminded me of myself. I huffed a little laugh at that thought as Brendan's arm slid up on the seat behind me. I gave him a pointed look, but he only smiled and left his arm where it was. I didn't like

that too much. He should have taken the hint and eased back. That's what a gentleman would have done, right? Brendan may be a trained Extinguisher but that wasn't an excuse to act like a creep. So, I sat forward stiffly and edged closer to Abby under the premise of refreshing my drink.

Abby gave me a discerning look, glanced over at Brendan, and then slid her own arm around my shoulder to ease me even closer to her. “We're going to have so much fun tonight,” she said gaily as she cast a reproving look at Brendan. “No matter what.”

A shiver rolled down my spine like a mischievous ice cube. Words like that had a way of conjuring challenges. The Universe, like a fairy, loves to give you exactly what you ask for.

Chapter Ten

The club was down a back alley and through an unmarked metal door. Unmarked to the casual observer that is. For all of us with clairvoyance, there was a large sign which read: *Lights Out.* I grinned at the obvious play on extinguishers and glanced at Abby, who fidgeted with excitement beside me like a puppy waiting at the door for his daily walk. We'd been to this club once before when we were both eighteen and had just given our vows to become Extinguishers. It had been a crazy, tequila-soaked night filled with debauchery, and I was both scared of and hoping for a repeat.

Brendan rapped on the door sharply and it was only a few moments before it swung open to reveal a large Irish man in your basic bouncer attire; black muscle T and black jeans. He looked us up and down and then stepped aside. Abby grinned wider at me and took my hand as we went in. I glanced back at Brendan, but he seemed to have learned his lesson from his failure in the limo and had adjusted his behavior. He waved me on with a magnanimous smile.

Inside, there was a small antechamber with a comfy chair, several TVs showing scenes from both inside and outside the club, and a window which looked out onto the club. The bouncer opened a door set into the wall beside the window and thumping bass slapped me in the eardrums. I cringed a little but smiled through the pain as Abby dragged me inside with her. I wondered briefly if I'd still be able to hear in the morning.

The club was dark in the way of most nightclubs; a sort of mysterious murk that allows for flashing lights to illuminate intriguing pieces of people or objects. You end up forming images

in your mind far more enticing than reality. There was a light fog lurking around the floor, probably the result of a machine and not anything as wonderful as magic, and there was a wide, black stage at the far end which seemed to float above the fog. The stage was the most brightly lit area in the room.

Onstage were gyrating musicians and before them, the foggy dance floor was full of gyrating extinguishers. Yep, all of them were extinguishers. I may have mentioned this before but we're a secretive group who hates to stray outside of our community. Not even for some R and R. If you're an extinguisher, you only dance with other extinguishers because sometimes dancing and drinking can lead to sex. Sex especially is only indulged in with other extinguishers; just in case your indiscretion results in offspring. We can't have any powerful babies running amok outside the families. Fortunately, we're a very large group and a very fertile one so we keep getting larger. It hasn't been a case of kissing cousins for quite some time now.

We found a table on the outskirts of the dance floor and ordered some drinks. Abby was still displaying puppy-like zeal—hopping up and down in her seat, raring to go—but Jared just relaxed back into his chair with a slide which clearly said he was there to stay. Brendan looked over at me with a raised brow.

“I'm good.” I looked at Abby. “Why don't you take Abby out to dance, and I'll wait here with Jared?”

“Really?” Brendan lifted his brows. “I seem to remember a school dance where you never left the floor.”

“Yeah, I was thirteen and didn't care if I made a fool out of myself.” I chuckled. “I think I flailed about more than danced and my moves haven't improved much since then.”

“Your moves were good enough for me to remember them.” Brendan grinned.

“Good, hold onto that memory”—I grinned back

—“because that's all you're going to get.”

“I'm coming back for you when they play a slow song,” Brendan vowed.

“Fine,” I huffed.

“You're sure you're okay with me leaving you here?” Brendan cocked his head at me.

“As long as Jared is cool with you dancing with his girl?” I looked over at Abby's boyfriend.

“I'm fine.” Jared nudged Abby. “Go on, honey, I know you want to dance.”

“Yay!” Abby jumped up and tugged on Brendan's arm. “Come on, come on!”

Brendan laughed and let her drag him onto the floor. I smiled as I watched them slide into a clear space and Abby's red hair started swinging around with her wacky dance moves. Evidently, she still didn't care about people's opinions of her. I kind of envied that.

“Dancing isn't your thing either?” Jared asked me as Claudine and Matthew followed Abby and Brendan to the dance floor.

“Not really,” I admitted. “I can do the slow sway like no one's business, though.”

“Me too,” Jared said. “You wanna see?” He sat up and barely moved side to side in his seat.

“Nice!” I shared a quick fist-pound with him and then sat back as the waitress deposited our drinks on our table.

“Abby said you were pretty wild, but you seem rather calm to me,” he observed.

“I was more wild before—” I frowned and took a sip of my drink.

“Yeah, I heard.” He grimaced and took an awkward sip as well. “Sorry about that.”

“Thanks.” I looked away, and he let me because he was a guy, and he understood that you didn't push someone when they were reliving a trauma.

“Good thing I'm such a great conversationalist,” he joked, and I jerked my gaze back to him to find him grinning apologetically.

“Yeah, good thing.” I laughed a little. “Maybe we should talk about your relationship with my friend next.”

“Ow.” He held a hand to his chest. “That was unfair.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But, seriously”—I pointed at him —“what are your intentions with Abigail?”

“Relax, Mommy.” He held up his hands in surrender. “Come on, what are anyone's intentions? We're extinguishers; I intend to marry her and have lots of baby extinguishers. It's part of our job. I think it's even in the contract.”

“Yeah.” I sighed; my good mood ruined.

“Hey.” Jared hit my shoulder with his fist. “It's not as if it's a hardship. Look around; we're not exactly ugly people, and we're not hurting for choices either.”

“No, I know.” I took another swig of my rum and coke. “We're all fit—we have to be—and most of us are pretty... well... pretty, but it's just the whole *required to do it* thing that pisses me off.”

“I agree,” he said, “I—hey, what the hell's a fairy doing here?”

I followed Jared's stare over to the bar where a familiar fairy face was staring right back at me. As if it had been doing so for quite awhile. My jaw dropped as I unwittingly got to my feet and began walking toward Tiernan.

“What are you doing?” Jared's voice stopped me before I got too far.

“My job,” I called back to him as I kept walking. “I'm keeping the peace.”

I wound through the throng; several members of which were staring aggressively at the fairy Count who was leaning so casually against their bar. As if he belonged. No, as if he owned the damn place. I felt my face settle into harsh lines as I stepped before him and crossed my arms.

“Explain your presence,” I demanded.

“I was raised by courtiers.” Tiernan shrugged. “I can't help having a dignified air. I apologize if I don't blend in better.”

“I mean explain your presence *here*,” I snapped. “Why are you standing here, right now, in an Extinguisher bar?”

“I'm here for you,” he said as his gaze wandered over my ensemble appreciatively. “Wasn't my staring obvious enough?”

“Well, yeah.” I frowned; my arms slipping down in confusion. “But why? What do you want?”

“I have a theory I'd like to share with you, but I had reservations of revealing it to the others.” Tiernan leaned forward so I could hear him above the music.

“Then why didn't you tell me when I was back at the council house? Why follow me here?” I found myself leaning closer to him as well. “How did you even get in here?”

“They could hardly deny entrance to a member of the Wild

Hunt," Tiernan scoffed. "And I couldn't find a moment alone with you at the council house. I was hoping to do so here."

"You call this alone?" I looked around and winced when I saw the accusing stares of my fellow extinguishers.

We were taught to like fairies, protect them and our truce, but that didn't mean we wanted them in our club; ruining our fun time and talking with our women. At least that's what the looks I was getting conveyed. Tiernan was about to get his ass kicked; Lord of the Wild Hunt or not.

"Come on, you're about to get jumped by an angry extinguisher mob." I grabbed Tiernan's hand and pulled him out onto the dance floor; casting challenging looks and combative barbs around me as we went. "That's right, he's with me. Wanna take a picture?" Stares lost their aggression under my own antagonism and most of them looked away. "Just a Lord of the Hunt, people; nothing to see here."

Almost on cue, the band began to play a slow, hip-grinding, tribal song just as we reached the dance floor. Tiernan looked a little shocked when I turned to face him; as if he were unsure of how he'd ended up in the middle of all these dancing humans. So, I took his hands and put them—none too gently—on my waist. His look transformed; intensifying into something dark and damned sexy.

Tiernan's startling eyes were bright in the shadowy atmosphere and so was the delicate scar on his cheek. They both caught the roaming lights and flashed as he settled his hands more firmly around my waist; one of them sliding up my back to pull me against his chest. I was about to protest when my hands moved up onto his shoulders of their own accord, and I found my face inches away from his.

"Tell me what you came to say." I nearly cringed when I heard the low timbre of my own voice.

“It doesn't make any sense.” His face lowered half an inch further and his chest pushed into mine.

I could feel the steady pounding of his heart through the fabric between us and a sweet, woodsy scent lifted up from his warm skin to taunt me.

“What doesn't?” I blinked up at him; fascinated by the curve of his lips. They were perfect, not too full, not too thin. Masculine but still sensual.

“My team never disobeys me.” Tiernan's breath caressed my cheek with a crisply clean scent like a clear stream and his hand slid over my back in lazy circles. “If you hadn't done it, I would have killed them myself for insubordination. So, why risk death just to kill one dryad?”

“Maybe they were in on the plot,” I offered; trying to concentrate on what he was saying instead of the way his body molded perfectly to mine, our curves and dips fitting into each other like puzzle pieces. This attraction was insane; what was wrong with me?

“Impossible.” Tiernan shook his head; his gaze shifting from my eyes to my lips. “They only leave Fairy when we hunt. There's no way for them to form such an alliance.”

“Well, they allied with someone,” I whispered.

“I don't think they were after Aideen,” he whispered back intimately; so low that I could barely hear him.

“What?” I leaned closer until I was pressed cheek-to-cheek with him.

“I think they were after you,” he spoke into my ear; igniting shivers there with the warm tickle of his breath.

“What?!” I jerked back to look up at him. His shoulders

were more muscled than I'd thought, and I found myself digging my fingers into them; trying to find something firm to hold onto. “Why?”

“I don't know.” We had stopped moving and were just standing there, staring at each other. “Who are you, Seren Sloane? Who are you *really*?”

“No one,” I stammered, “just an extinguisher.”

“That alone is something of merit”—he shook his head —“but you're right; it's not enough to get fairies to hunt you. So, it must be something else. What is it? Why you?”

“Why do you even think they were after me?” I shot back.

“You think it too,” he said with an air of revelation. “I can see it in your face.”

“All right, I've had enough dancing.” I pulled him off the dance floor and headed toward the door of the club. “We need to talk about this somewhere else.” Translation: I couldn't think straight when I was pressed up against him.

“Seren?” Brendan suddenly stood in front of us. “What the hell's going on?”

“Just give us a minute, Brendan.” I tried to push past him, but he angled into my way again.

“I don't think so.” He was staring at Tiernan with gladiatorial animosity.

“I don't need you to move for me to get past you, Extinguisher.” Tiernan smiled with matching malevolence. “In fact, I'd prefer it if you didn't.”

“Stop it,” I shot at both of them. “We're currently on the same side, but your male egos are obscuring that. So, pack them away and get on board here. Brendan, I will be back in a few

minutes, and I assure you, I can kick his ass all on my own without your help... and I can kick your ass too if necessary."

Brendan blinked and then gave a surprised bark of laughter. "You always were a wild thing, and I always loved that about you, Seren," He held his hands up. "All right, go talk to the fairy, but make it quick or I'll be coming after you."

"She's not your wife yet, mini-Murdock," Tiernan said, and I groaned.

"What did you call me?" Brendan's face shifted into fury.

"I swear to God, I'll—" I blinked and then realized that I truly didn't give a shit about either of these men. "Fuck it." I dropped Tiernan's hand and just started to walk away from them both.

"Seren, where are you going?" Tiernan chased after me.

"Away from the two of you." I glanced back and saw that Brendan was following too. Stupid boys.

"We haven't finished our conversation," Tiernan tried again.

"Obviously, your conversation with Brendan has become more important to you, and Brendan seems to agree." I shot a nasty glare at Brendan. "You're welcome to each other. I'm leaving you to your bromance."

"I cannot allow you to walk back to the council house alone," Tiernan insisted.

"Hey, fairy," Brendan ground out, "she's my date; I'll take her home."

"She doesn't seem to *want* you to take her home," Tiernan observed smugly.

“I don't want either of you fucktards to take me home!” I shouted, and the club went as quiet as a club could get.

Then everyone cheered; shouting encouragements to me and even some offers to be the one taking me home instead of the fucktards.

“What is a *fucktard*?” Tiernan frowned.

“Basically, it's a stupid fucker. Or, to simplify it”—I rolled my eyes and started walking away again—“*you guys*.”

They followed me out of the club. Of course, they did; annoying men always follow you when you try to walk away from them. I have no idea why.

“I do need to speak further with you, Seren,” Tiernan said again.

“She's *Extinguisher* Seren to you, asshole,” Brendan ground out.

I turned around and punched Brendan in the face. Yep, I was just that angry. The brilliant part was that he went down like a felled tree. I stood gaping at the fallen bulk of Brendan a second before he began to groan and rub his jaw. Tiernan didn't seem shocked at all; extremely pleased but not shocked. He waved a hand in the air and a red sports car was revealed; parked right in front of the club. Nice trick. Then he took my hand and led me over to it while Brendan was still trying to get to his feet.

“That was the most entertaining thing I've seen in a long time,” Tiernan commented casually as he opened the door for me.

“Wait a minute.” I stood within the open door. “I never said I was going to leave with you.”

“Seren, this is an urgent matter,” he said and sighed. “I know I've behaved poorly tonight, and I apologize for it but the

way that man was acting with you—so presumptuous and barbaric—incurred my ire."

"He *was* kind of presumptuous." I sighed and slid into the leather seat. "All right, let's go."

"Thank you." Tiernan nodded and shut the door.

Brendan finally made it to a standing position and started stumbling after us as we sped away.

Chapter Eleven

“That man is not a good match for you,” Tiernan said as he moved smoothly through the wicked web that was also known as the streets of San Francisco.

“We're not talking about Brendan,” I said impatiently. “Or my job requirement of marrying another extinguisher.”

“It's a job requirement?” He looked at me aghast.

“Pretty much.” I closed my eyes and rubbed at my forehead. “But, as I said, we're not discussing it.”

“Fine, we'll discuss how I'm going to be stuck to your side until we figure this whole thing out.”

“Excuse me?” I opened my eyes to stare at him in shock. “Who named you my guardian?”

“The High Council of Fairy,” he proclaimed serenely.

“They did not.” I smirked at him.

“Not in those exact words, no.” He never lost his cool. “But they told me to discover the truth of these events, and I intend to do so.”

“And you think I'm going to somehow lead you to the truth?” I laughed.

“Yes, I do.” Tiernan barely glanced to the left before he zipped into the other lane.

“You drive like a maniac,” I noted.

“I am a Lord of the Wild Hunt.” He slid his eyes over to me. “We don't know how to drive slowly.”

“Whose car is this anyway?” I looked around the posh interior; trying to stall so I could make some sense of what he was saying.

“It belongs to the Hunt.” Tiernan shifted gears as we went uphill. “We have one in every city, just in case.”

“Just in case you need to hightail it away from an Extinguisher club with another man's date?” I grinned at him.

“Yes, that precisely,” he said drolly.

“You can't follow me around all day, Tiernan,” I huffed. “And this makes no damn sense! A bunch of fairies are not trying to kill me. Why would they want to?”

“Why would someone want to murder your mother?” He asked simply.

“You know about that?” I gaped at him.

“I looked into you before I came to San Francisco,” he admitted.

“Why?”

“Because—” he blinked and then cleared his throat. “Because I need to know who I'm working with.”

“You had no idea you'd be working with me,” I pointed out.

“Stop dodging the question,” he shot back. “Someone sent those pukas after your mother and now I think they're coming for you.”

“But this isn't about me; this is about Aideen and what she

knows." I shook my head.

"Perhaps," he conceded, "but you play a part; I'm sure of it. I can feel it; like an itch just below my skin."

"Oh, I hate those itches," I groaned. "You scratch and scratch and nothing helps." I glanced over and saw him giving me an exasperated look. "I know you're not being literal. I was just trying for some levity."

"Next time you should try harder." He grimaced. "Or not at all."

"Wonderful." I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for the tip, Legolas."

"Do not make *Lord of the Rings* jokes with me," he said seriously. "We Fey, hate that."

"You shouldn't have told me that." I grinned. "Bad move, Harry Potter."

"I don't understand that reference." He frowned.

"The scar." I waved a hand at his face. "Did someone try to cast a killing curse on you but it didn't work because your mother loved you soooo much?"

"That's rather—" Tiernan blinked and looked away. "Do not call me that again."

"Fine." I gave a great sigh, "Legolas it is. It's more fun to say than Harry Potter anyway."

"There will come a day when I discover what irritates you, and I will not be gentle in my vengeance," he warned me.

"*You* irritate me," I said. "Go ahead, what more could you possibly do besides exist?"

“Now, you sound like my father,” he mumbled.

“What?” I whispered; suddenly contrite.

Had I actually said something that hurt his feelings? Had my careless words struck a nerve? I'd thought I'd been playing by the rules, but I guess I didn't know him well enough to play with him. It's all fun and games until someone gets hurt.

“Nothing.” Tiernan's jaw clenched as he stared straight ahead.

“You know, *my* father is not going to allow a fairy to be my constant companion,” I tried to get back on subject. “Not to mention the fact that I'm an extinguisher and can take care of myself.”

“I'm not doubting your abilities, Seren,” he said calmly. “I've heard your mother was quite competent as well and yet, she was killed.”

“Could you please stop bringing up my mother's death?”

“No, I think she's an important piece of the puzzle.” He glanced at me. “Although, I'm sorry if talking about her causes you pain.”

“It's fine.” I sighed. “Talking to you causes me pain, but here I am.”

“That is the second time you've insinuated that you find me unpalatable.” Tiernan pulled the car over into one of the rarest things in San Francisco; a legal parking spot. He turned to me and took my jaw in his hand so I couldn't look away. “I am not a fairy to be trifled with, nor am I one to consort with humans. I find most of them to be crude, stupid, and, frankly, repulsive but there is something about you that I'm drawn to, and I know you feel it too. You can't deny that you desired me tonight.”

Tiernan's hold loosened; the pupils in his eyes dilating as his palm went flat along my jaw, his thumb lightly stroking my lips. My breath caught and then I exhaled softly against his skin. He pressed the pad of his thumb against me—separating my lips to rest his flesh against my teeth—and his gaze dropped to my mouth. Then that hand slid back along my cheek; his fingers firm and determined against my skin. They sank into my hair and clutched at the strands as his eyes lifted to mine once more.

Tiernan started that slow lean which always leads to a kiss, and I watched in fascination as his eyelids drifted shut. His breath mingled with mine; the air between us heating deliciously. I started to close my eyes as the tender flesh of his lips just barely brushed mine. A jolt of sensation rocketed through me from that gossamer graze and shocked me back into reason. I jerked away, and he looked at me as if I'd slapped him.

“Whether there is an attraction between us or not.” I was annoyed to find my breath coming swift and eager. “Whether or not you find me repulsive, there can't be anything between us.”

“Because I'm not an extinguisher?” He whispered; his striking eyes shining in the dark like a cat's.

“Even worse,” I said dryly, “you're a fairy, and even worse than that; you're a member of the Wild Hunt. This would be fraternization of the worst kind. There is literally no one who would be a more horrible match for me.”

“That's your father talking.” Tiernan angled his head as he studied me. “I don't think you believe that.”

I swallowed hard before I answered. Tiernan was right; I didn't believe it, and in that moment, I wanted nothing more than to close the distance between us and find out what he tasted like. I bet it was something rich and complex, like expensive red wine... and just as intoxicating.

“I have to marry an extinguisher,” I murmured; my gaze

dropping briefly to his lips.

“I'm not proposing.” Tiernan had caught my look and had started to lean in again.

“I hardly have the lifestyle for a fling with a fairy,” I protested but didn't move away as he continued to close the distance between us.

“I wasn't offering a fling either,” he was speaking against my lips; his breath fluttering across my skin.

“Then what?” I slid a hand between us and pushed him away from me; giving him a dark look.

“Something else.” His eyes were focused on my lips. “Something unique to us.”

“So, right here, then?” I looked around the car. “You want me to just jump over the gear shift and straddle you? Is that how you saw this playing out? Because let me tell you; I've made out in a sports car before and it's not comfortable.”

“No, not here.” His gaze lifted to my own; searing me with its intensity. “But I have an idea.”

“What exactly about this conversation makes you think that I'll be sleeping with you tonight?” I gaped at him.

“It's not your words.” Tiernan's breath was coming faster, and I was shocked to find my own quickening to pace his. His hand drifted over to where mine rested on my thigh and his fingers grazed the top of mine. A shivering sensation spread up from his touch; making my hand twitch. I swallowed roughly as his fingers snaked around mine to rub at the sensitive skin of my palm.

“What then?” My voice was just a breath of sound.

“It's your eyes.” His deep timbre vibrated through me; tightening my thighs and shifting our joined hands. He inhaled

sharply before he continued. “It's the way they stray over my body. And your lips; how they shiver just a little when I speak. It's the way your breasts are rising with your rapid breaths and the way your hands are shaking with the need to touch me. You want me, and I want you. Very badly. It's simple.”

“No, it isn't.” I held a hand out between us. “I don't know why you make me lose my damn mind, but I can't have that. I can't have *you*. So, I'm not going to do this. I refuse to torment myself with a relationship that can't go anywhere.”

“Fuck!” Tiernan shocked me by swearing and slamming his fist into the steering wheel. “I apologize,” he said immediately and calmed himself with a deep exhalation as he ran a hand through his long hair. Such a strange ombré effect. That platinum so bright in the shadows of the car; like a halo around his face. Then the color slowly deepened all the way to black at the ends; giving the illusion that his hair was turning into the darkness itself.

“It's all right.” I sighed. “I feel the same way.” And I did. My body was tense, as angry with me as he was; thrumming with need for a man we could never have. So stupid.

“Then why are you denying us this?” Tiernan looked over at me; his eyes wide with confusion. “A fairy would never ignore an attraction so strong. Pleasure should be taken wherever it can be found; especially for those of us who rarely find it.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes. “Don't you dare try to imply that you don't get laid all the time.”

“Ah.” He gave a grim laugh. “There's that crudeness I was referring to.”

“As if fairies aren't crude.” I lifted a brow at him.

“Not the sidhe”—he shook his head—“and I wouldn't couple with a lesser fey.”

“Well, there you go. I'm obviously not the girl for you.” I glanced away; unsure why his criticism of my behavior should hit me so hard.

“Stop doing that!” Tiernan grabbed my upper arm and gave it a little shake. “This is not going away; no matter what you say. And no, by the way, I don't *get laid* all the time.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I looked him over. “Not only are you gorgeous, you're a freaking Lord of the Wild Hunt; as you keep reminding me. That alone should drop some panties.”

He just sat there and gaped at me. Did he really not know how hot he was? I'd seen enough fairies to know that even among their stunning throng, this guy was something noteworthy. His humble, shocked expression had to be pretense... and it probably worked on a lot of women. God damned fairies; they were good at getting what they wanted.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I finally growled. “I'm not going to fall for your Eeyore routine.”

“My what?” He went from shocked to baffled.

“You know,” I said. “Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh; *Thanks for noticing me.*”

“I have no idea what you're talking about, but this person sounds pathetic, and I assure you; I am not that,” he said stiffly.

“No,” I said and laughed, “you're definitely not pathetic. Which leads me back to my point. You'll have no trouble finding another lover. So, why don't you go and do that, as will I, and we can both forget this ever happened?”

“There will be no forgetting.” Tiernan started up the car angrily. “This is far from over, Seren, but I refuse to sit here arguing with you about it on a public street where we could both

potentially become targets."

"I am not a target," I groaned as he pulled out into traffic. "No one is trying to kill me."

That was when the first wave of magic hit.

Chapter Twelve

An unnatural darkness descended around the car. I could hear the engine revving—a plaintive rumble—but we were no longer moving forward; we were moving upward. I pulled my little iron dagger from the sheath strapped to my thigh, and Tiernan automatically shifted away from it even as his attention settled on the impenetrable black outside our windows.

“Unseelie,” I whispered as I stared out from my side.

“Yes,” he agreed as light started to emanate from his palms. “But I am not.”

“Do you have a plan or should we just jump out and hope for the best?” I asked him with a jaunty smile.

“Are you enjoying this?” He asked with wide, horrified eyes.

“Maybe.” I grinned. “It's been awhile since I've seen this much action.”

“If you had agreed to a different sort of action between us, we may not be in this situation right now.” Tiernan narrowed his eyes at me.

“Are you seriously blaming me for this attack because I wouldn't have sex with you?” I laughed.

“Yes,” he said simply. Then he rolled down his window and launched a ball of white light into the darkness.

And I shut the hell up.

Mainly because that light illuminated some of the most horrifying monsters I'd ever seen. They were surrounding the car—some of them responsible for holding it aloft—and they all screeched pathetically when Tiernan's light hit them. They shrank away from it; the ones holding the car actually dropping us. We started falling a bit before they caught us again; sending me slamming into the ceiling. I felt like a damn 007 martini; shaken, not stirred.

“It's the Sluagh,” Tiernan's voice shook just a little. “They sent the damn Sluagh after us!”

“What?!” I screamed; cringing away from the windows.

“What? Not so excited about the fight anymore?” He growled.

“Shut up, you asshole!” I shouted. “It's the fucking Sluagh!”

“Yes, I know. I just said as much,” Tiernan said and seemed to calm. “Whatever you do, don't touch me with that damn blade.” He slid his hands under my ass and lifted me up as he angled himself over and into my seat. I found myself sitting on his lap. Under normal circumstances, I would have been impressed with the amount of strength and dexterity it took for that maneuver but just then, I was too terrified.

“What are you doing?” I stared back and forth between him and the looming gloom.

I'd only seen a glimpse but that was all that was needed in the case of the Sluagh. Some men had been driven insane by one glance at the monsters of Fairy, and the Sluagh was a collection of the most horrifying monsters Fairy had to offer. Things with too many eyes, too many teeth and claws. Creatures with tentacles, razor-sharp horns, acidic blood, or scaled skin. Massive bodies coated in slime or oozing poisonous pus.

Think of every nightmare you've ever had—every twisted thought you've dreamed up in your darkest hours of dormancy—when your pulse pounded in your ears and your skin shivered even as sweat ran down your stomach. These creatures were a thousand times more frightening than that. It was enough to paralyze your average human and even for me—an extinguisher who was trained for this very situation—it was almost debilitating.

“I'm getting us out of here.” Tiernan held me tightly to his chest as he opened the door. “Hold onto me with one hand and just stab out blindly with the other; the one holding that iron blade.”

“Yes, I know which hand to stab with,” I growled.

“Just making sure.” Tiernan launched us into the sinister sky, and I tightened my hold on his shoulders.

Terrible sounds filled the air around us as we fell like Icarus; hitting bodies as we went. Things squished, cracked, and thudded against me as roars and growls filled my ears, but when I stabbed out with my weapon, the sounds turned into cries of agony. I felt the warm spray of blood across my face and kept stabbing. Over and over, I pushed that little piece of metal out into the dark and met solid resistance. Over and over I stabbed through that resistance until my arm started to burn from the strain.

Then we were out of the malignant murk and the city sparkled far below us to the right. They'd taken us out over the bay and high up into the sky. I saw Tiernan's beautiful car go plummeting down on our left as a brisk wind began to blow from beneath us; slowing our descent. It caught us gently and shifted us toward land with smooth but swift intention. I shot Tiernan an impressed look. Such a degree of control over a flighty magic like air was more a mark of royalty than his title was.

A huge splash erupted from the bay as the car struck the water and then the roiling cloud of darkness above us started to move in our direction. Tiernan's jaw clenched and the wind picked

up; blowing us even faster toward a nearby cliff.

“As soon as we land, we run!” He shouted to me over the wind.

“Right!” I nodded; my blade extended far away from him. “Hit the ground running; got it.”

The monsters of the Sluagh were getting eager, or maybe they were just plain pissed because they were moving faster than their shadow cover and some of them were starting to poke through the obvious disguise. I cringed and set my attention on the ground. I wouldn't look at them unless I absolutely had to.

“It's a type of magic.” Tiernan squeezed me tighter. “The fear you're feeling isn't just from their appearance.”

“As if they needed any help.” I grimaced and then looked up at him with a smile. “Thank you for telling me that.”

“Of course.” Tiernan nodded and set his attention back to directing our fall.

Sometimes with magic, all you needed was knowledge of it to lessen its power over you. This was especially true for illusion magic which counted on you not looking too closely. I was still afraid, but my fear had lessened significantly. I'd never been told that the Sluagh used illusion magic to enhance their fearsomeness, which meant the Extinguishers as a whole had no knowledge of it. Which also meant that Tiernan had probably just betrayed some sort of fairy code by revealing it to me. Just as Aideen had done when she told me about the pukas.

“I won't share that information, I promise,” I said as we neared the ground, and he gave me a sharp, surprised glance.

“Prepare yourself.” Tiernan nodded downward. “We're going to hit hard. Don't tense up; keep your knees flexible.”

“Yes, I know how to land,” I huffed, but we hit a little more harshly than I expected and the impact, combined with those hellish high heels, sent me to my knees.

Tiernan jerked me to my feet, and we immediately started to run. We headed straight into the trees; me a little behind him since the fairy had a way of navigating through nature that no human could match. Plants seemed to simply move out of our way as he led me through the dark. He was nearly silent too; his feet barely touching the ground and his body sliding against leaves like a fish through water. I was not nearly as quiet.

My feet seemed to land on every rock there was and those heels slid into every hole when they weren't stabbing into the ground and slowing me down. I nearly fell a couple of times. Finally, I gave up and began to levitate a little with each step, making my footfalls closer in nature to his; a mere touch on the earth. As I did, I felt myself steady; as if tapping into my psychic abilities reminded me of who I was and what I was capable of. My breath came easier and my muscles seemed to fill with energy. I felt strong again.

Tiernan glanced back at my feet—just a quick glint of silver in the dark—but I saw it and knew he had wondered about my change in pace. Then he dropped suddenly and pulled me with him. We rolled into a hollow made by the root of a redwood tree, and I felt a wave of magic coast over us.

“Please sheath your blade,” he whispered into my hair, and I carefully slid my dagger into its sheath. “Thank you.” He sighed. “Now, just try and be still.”

“What did you do?” I began to take slow, even breaths.

“I've masked our auras to blend with that of the tree's.” Tiernan's hands clenched on my back. “Here they come. Just close your eyes, Seren. I've got you; I won't let them hurt you.”

I don't think anyone has ever said those words to me. Not

even my mother. From a very young age, I was raised to be strong; to never rely on anyone but myself. I was loved but never coddled, and when I got hurt or scared, I was basically told to suck it up. To hear someone tell me that they would protect me—that they would make sure everything would be all right—was like drinking a bitter tonic. It choked me on the way down; making me resent my parents just a little and wish, for just a moment, that my life had been different. Then it seemed to hit my heart and this warm, tremulous feeling began to thrum there; spreading out slowly to my whole body.

No, no, no, no, I shouted internally. *Don't you dare! Don't fall for a damn fairy!* But with my face pressed into Tiernan's neck and his scent of rich amber and sandalwood cocooning me in calm, I couldn't find the strength to fight against it. For once, someone else was going to be strong; I didn't have to. The overwhelming relief of that was dizzying.

Then a snuffling sound came from right beside us, along with the slide of something wet through the underbrush, and the breath caught in my throat as I froze. Tiernan went still as well; nothing moving but the rush of blood through our veins. Thrashing noises came from all around us and then a horrifying shriek which made me flinch. Clearly, someone was frustrated. I would have laughed if I hadn't been so damned scared.

Tiernan's cheek slid down my temple and then he shifted so that his lips were pressed to me there. His arms were already around me; one in the middle of my back and one over my thigh. The hand at my thigh was pressed against bare flesh; right below the hem of my dress. I felt Tiernan's finger move the tiniest fraction of an inch so that it edged beneath the fabric. I inhaled sharply; the sound muffled by his chest. He went still; a question in that stillness. I knew that all I had to do was remain as I was and nothing more would happen, but I didn't.

It was almost involuntary; the way my stomach clenched and my hips tilted up into his. I moved barely a centimeter but it

brought a very sensitive place on my body in contact with a very firm piece of his. Tiernan swallowed roughly and pressed into me; that hard length between us hitting a place on me which had me closing my eyes in yearning. The hand at my thigh edged higher beneath the hemline and his fingers stroked my hypersensitive skin.

My heart was in my throat; the pound of it making it hard to breathe. The mix of fear and desire was bewildering; leaving me desperate to tilt the balance one way or the other, and I nearly gave in to the urge to turn my face up and into his kiss. There was no way to do it quietly; I was pressed back into the hollow of earth, and I knew that such a large movement would surely dislodge something. It was all the Sluagh needed to find us. Still, the temptation remained tingling in my veins like a possessing demon until the sounds around us faded, and the forest went quiet.

“They're gone,” Tiernan whispered, and I was sure he was going to kiss me then. Hell, I even wanted him to, but he didn't. He just pulled away and looked me over before he asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.” I took a deep, shaky breath. My body was still thrumming with desire but now that the Sluagh were gone, I was able to think again and remember that this was a bad idea.

“You must think I'm an opportunistic cad,” Tiernan muttered. “Please accept my apologies for my behavior. I thought I would take your mind off the fear, but I got a bit carried away and honestly, it was entirely self-serving. I shouldn't have taken advantage of the situation.”

I blinked up at his shadowed eyes; part of me hating him for being so... “Damn amazing. That's what I think you are.”

“You do?” His gaze returned to mine and a soft smile spread across his lips.

“You didn't take advantage of anything,” I admitted. “I think you know that, but I appreciate you trying to take responsibility for my lapse in judgment. I shouldn't have encouraged you.”

“Ah, I see.” He gave a little huff. “Fear induced insanity.”

“I do think you're amazing, Tiernan,” I whispered. “I've never seen anything like what you did tonight.”

“Well, I can take care of myself,” he mimicked my earlier words

“And me too evidently,” I mumbled and looked away; not sure how I should feel about that.

“That wasn't meant to offend you.” Tiernan turned my face back to his. “I know you're capable, but sometimes even the strongest person needs some help and, frankly, I'm glad you needed mine. Every man needs to feel as if he can protect his woman.”

“Uh, I'm not your woman.” I made a fractious face at him.

“You will be.” He grinned and got to his feet.

Tiernan held a hand down to me, and I stared hard at it. That warm feeling was still rushing through me, and I knew I was dangerously close to becoming involved with this dangerously beautiful and dangerously sexy man. I also knew that nothing more than this would happen between us, it just couldn't. He would realize it soon enough, but I didn't want to argue about it and ruin the moment so I put my hand in his and let him help me up.

“Just get me back to the damn council house,” I muttered, and Tiernan laughed.

Chapter Thirteen

The San Francisco Council House was in an uproar when our cab pulled up in front of it. First, Brendan had returned without me and then a huge magical discharge had been felt emanating from somewhere over San Francisco Bay. The Extinguishers and councilpersons alike were in a tizzy. Then I walked in holding the hand of a fairy and looking as if I'd been rolling around in a battlefield; frolicking with him in the blood and muck. I thought my father was going to burst a blood vessel.

“There he is!” Brendan pointed an imperious finger at Tiernan. “He must be the one responsible for that magic.”

“He's not,” I growled, “and I'm fine, Brendan; thanks so much for asking. Don't worry, this blood isn't mine.”

“Extinguisher Seren.” One of the councilwomen approached us. “Would you please tell us what happened tonight? It appears that you may have first-hand knowledge.”

“That I do.” I grimaced and let go of Tiernan's hand reluctantly. Oh, that reluctance was not a good sign.

“Allow me.” Tiernan stepped forward and laid a hand on my shoulder.

“First, you'll be taking your hand off my daughter,” my father snarled as he stepped up to Tiernan.

“Dad.” I angled between them. “He just saved my life. Big time.” The room went silent. “You're going to listen to him, all of you are, because he's earned that much at least.”

“My Lord Tiernan,” the councilwoman said, “please

proceed."

"I had some things I wanted to go over with Extinguisher Seren about the attack involving the fairies from my team," Tiernan began. "So, I went after her tonight. I offered her a ride back here when I saw that my presence in the nightclub was causing a disturbance."

Brendan snorted but was shushed by his father.

"We were attacked by the Sluagh," I growled, and everyone went silent again. "This is Sluagh blood on me"—I glanced down at the assortment of gore I was covered in—"and other Sluagh fluids."

"My car was apprehended and lifted with us inside it," Tiernan went on. "We had to abandon the vehicle and evade the Sluagh before we were able to make our way back here."

"You evaded the Sluagh?" Councilman Murdock stepped forward; leaving his sputtering son behind him.

"There are ways it can be done," Tiernan said.

I smiled and shook my head; knowing that Alan Murdock was even more impressed than I had been at Tiernan's skills. The Sluagh may be comprised of fairies but that didn't mean fairies were better equipped to handle the monsters. No one went up against the Sluagh by choice and very few faced them and lived.

"We'll be infiltrating Gentry Technologies tomorrow," Councilman Murdock said with a shrewd look. "We'd be pleased if you would accompany us."

"If Seren is going, so am I," Tiernan said calmly; surprising everyone in the room yet again.

Everyone except for myself. I was half expecting him to say something like that but, still, I groaned when he did; especially

when I saw my father's expression. Facing the Sluagh may prove easier than facing Extinguisher Ewan Sloane.

Chapter Fourteen

“Do you still doubt that someone is trying to kill you?” Tiernan was following me down the hallway to the suite I was sharing with Aideen and my father.

The two of them were following him. We'd just spent hours with the council, going over every detail of what had happened that evening, and I was exhausted. Exhausted and annoyed because they'd agreed that Tiernan should be allowed to join our group and watch over me. Meaning; he got to stay in our suite tonight. In our suite!

“Why would someone want to kill me?” I asked yet again.

“Perhaps your father knows?” Tiernan stopped and turned to look at my dad.

“There's no reason for anyone to go after Seren.” My father narrowed his eyes at Tiernan. “All of her kills have been legal.”

“Legal or not”—Tiernan looked back at me—“someone powerful enough to command the Sluagh is after your daughter.”

“You don't think they were simply trying to get to me through Seren?” Aideen asked in a small voice.

“No, I don't, and I don't think Seren does either.” Tiernan was staring at me strangely. “You have an odd look on your face.”

“You don't know her well enough to judge whether or not she looks odd.” My father was edging in belligerently toward Tiernan.

“Evidently he does”—I didn't take my gaze off Tiernan

—“because you know as well as I do that he's right.”

“Let's take this inside our suite.” My father sighed and unlocked the door for us.

We followed him into the central living area; a spacious room with wall-to-wall, navy-blue carpeting and black leather couches gathered in the center. There was a modern kitchenette in the far right corner with a small wood table in front of it and a door to the right of that. Then to either side of the room were two more doors. All three of them led to bedrooms; one for each of us... not including Tiernan. He'd have to sleep on the couch. I stared at one of the sleek leather couches; an image of a sexy, sleepy Tiernan stretched across one filling my head until Aideen walked through my line of sight. She went to the kitchenette and put a kettle of water on the stove.

“Explain.” My father shut the door behind us.

“You know this already,” I said, “I told you on the plane.”

“What? That the fairy bitch attacked you first instead of Aideen?” He scoffed. “So what? Any warrior knows to take out the strongest first. Aideen posed no threat; even if the girl had run, they would have been able to catch her.”

“Um, I'm four-hundred-fifty-six years old; hardly a girl,” Aideen interjected timidly.

“Lissa attacked you first?” Tiernan asked; ignoring both my father and Aideen.

“She grabbed me and pulled me into the air,” I said. “She seemed rather intent on separating me from my father.”

“That makes twice that unseelie fey have tried to carry you off.” Tiernan frowned.

“Carry me off?” I cocked my head at him. “Are you saying

they may not have been trying to kill me?"

"No." Tiernan ran a hand through the hair at his temple, and I found myself staring at his long, elegant fingers. They were more the hands of an artist than a warrior. "I don't know," he admitted. "But it's strange that they both would try to remove you from the ground."

"Well, none of us can fly," Dad huffed as he fell back onto a couch. "It doesn't take a genius to figure out that a fall could kill us."

"None of you can fly, but I've heard that some of you can levitate." Tiernan cast me an assessing look as he gestured toward the couches, and I took a seat. He sat beside me; turning his body toward mine so he could still look at me while we spoke.

"Yes, I can levitate. That's what I was doing in the forest," I admitted. "But hovering midway between earth and sky doesn't have a lot of benefits. Being able to run faster and more quietly has been the best so far, and I just learned that trick tonight. Levitation wouldn't have saved me from that fall earlier. You did that."

"Between earth and sky," Tiernan whispered as he frowned, but before he could say anything else, the kettle began to whistle.

"Oh, here we are," Aideen interrupted.

Aideen took the kettle off the stove and poured the water into a waiting teapot. She put the teapot on a tray with four mugs, a bowl of sugar, a pitcher of cream, and some spoons, and then brought the whole thing over to us. She carefully placed it down on the coffee table in the middle of the gathering of couches and smiled as if it were a marvelous accomplishment.

"Tea?" She asked brightly.

"Thank you." Tiernan politely accepted a cup, but my

father and I just gaped at her.

Was she seriously interrupting us for tea?

“A warm cup of tea will help you think,” she insisted and handed me a teacup.

“Thanks.” I frowned down into my tea, and then shrugged and spooned in some sugar.

“Cream?” Aideen asked, but I shook my head. “An Irishwoman who drinks her tea without cream?”

“I only like cream in my coffee.” I shrugged, and Aideen glanced at Tiernan with wide eyes.

He narrowed his at her.

“What?” I snapped.

“Nothing.” She smiled. “It's just that most fairies feel the same way. We like our tea sweetened only. Cream ruins the natural flavors.”

“Anyway.” I rolled my eyes. “There's no special reason to lift me into the air. It doesn't make a difference.”

“Unless they didn't want you to levitate.” Tiernan tapped his cup as if he were trying to put his finger on a thought.

“How about a snack?” Aideen popped up from the seat she'd just taken and ran over to the refrigerator. “I think I saw some things to make sandwiches with. Anyone want a sandwich? I think we're supposed to have little ones when we drink tea. I could cut them up small.”

“We're fine, thank you.” I narrowed my eyes at her. Why was she so damn nervous? Then it hit me, and I sighed. “It's okay to be scared, Aideen. After seeing the Sluagh in person, I totally understand how even the thought of them is enough to disturb

you.”

“Oh, I'll be okay.” Aideen laughed nervously and came to sit back down beside me.

“Why would they want to keep me from levitating?” I looked back at Tiernan.

“Are you sure you don't want a sandwich?” Aideen asked again. “Not even a little one?”

“Aideen, please,” I huffed. “Relax; we're all safe in here. This house is charmed against unwelcome visitors, especially fairy ones. Unless someone welcomes the Sluagh in, they won't be able to step one foot... er... tentacle... hoof... whatever inside.”

“Let me pour you a cup, Aideen.” Tiernan reached over to the teapot and poured a cup of tea, then handed it carefully to the dryad.

Aideen nodded her thanks as she reached for the cup and some delicate, flexible branches slipped out of her hair. They were thin like vines but definitely branches; with fluted, delicate, pastel flowers whose color matched her hair perfectly. She inhaled sharply and slipped them back into her tresses self-consciously, but not before their scent drifted over to us.

“Is that night blooming jasmine?” I asked, and she flinched; spilling a little tea into her saucer.

“Drat,” she huffed and got up to fetch a napkin.

“You're a Night Queen?” Tiernan's eyes went round. “But that means—”

“Yes, let it be!” She snapped at Tiernan, and he jerked as if she'd hit him. “I apologize, my lord; I'm a little on edge. I only lose control of my blooms when I'm under strain.”

“Of course.” Tiernan nodded gallantly, but his eyes held a

strange look. “Think nothing of it.”

“I love night blooming jasmine.” I smiled at Aideen. “I'd forgotten that it was also called Night Queen. The name suits it, though. We have a tree in our yard back in Hawaii and when I come home at night, the fragrance rules the night. It suits you as well.”

“Thank you.” Aideen settled in beside me again and gave my hand a pat.

“This is ridiculous,” my father growled. “We don't have time to talk about flowers and drink tea.”

A knock at the door startled all of us, but Dad got up and went to answer it immediately. It was one of the council aids; sent to let us know that extra guards had been posted to watch for the Sluagh and that we were expected to report in tomorrow at 8 AM for the briefing before we left for Gentry Technologies.

I groaned and looked at my watch. It was 3 AM so that meant I'd only get about four hours of sleep. I put my teacup down, stood up, and started heading toward my room. At that point, I didn't care what anyone else did or said; I was getting into bed while I still had the chance.

“Seren,” Tiernan stopped me.

“What?” I asked in a whiny groan.

“Sleep well,” his low voice followed me into my bedroom, and I determinedly shut the door on the sexy sound.

Shivers coasted over my arms as I started to undress for bed, and all I could think about was being held by Tiernan under that tree; our hearts beating together as his lips pressed against my skin. Tiernan was going to be a problem, a big one, and I had no idea what to do about him. Whatever I did, it couldn't be what I wanted.

Chapter Fifteen

I cast a look around the crowded van; my gaze lingering on the two fairies amid the mass of extinguishers. We humans were wearing combat gear; kevlar body armor, thick boots, and helmets reinforced with iron to guard against fairy mind tricks. There were pockets in our pants which were filled with anti-fey charms such as four-leaf clovers and St. John's Wort even though all of us were gifted enough to see and battle the Fey all on our own. Charms added just a little bit of extra protection that sometimes made all the difference in a magic-based fight.

I could tell that Tiernan and Aideen were feeling very uncomfortable around all those charms and iron weapons but the Council had done its best to make them as safe as possible, and they were both wearing full combat suits as well; without the charms or helmets. The suits would protect them against any accidental cuts from our iron weapons. Even a careless brush against one of our blades could burn them.

I glanced into Tiernan's silver eyes and ended up staring. The outer ring of black around his iris made their strange metallic color seem brighter in the dim interior, almost hypnotic, like those rings were drawing me in. He gave me a slow, knowing smile, and I looked away; my gaze landing on Brendan who was three men down from Tiernan on the bench across from mine. Brendan's look was a disturbing mix of sadness and anger. Disturbing because I knew that look; my father had worn it since the day Mom died. Men who looked like that didn't care who they hurt as long as they found a way to make their own pain diminish. I knew then that Tiernan was right; Brendan was not for me.

Mini-Murdock might not have thought I'd be an easy win,

but he obviously hadn't expected to work so hard for me either. Tiernan was amazing, but he was also off-limits to me; a fact that Brendan could have used to his advantage. If he had manned-up and accepted a little competition, I may have been impressed enough to give him another chance. Instead, he threw tantrums like a toddler until he just gave up and sulked. No woman wanted a sulker, no matter how attractive he was.

The van jerked to a stop and the back doors opened; revealing our team leader, Extinguisher Eric Kavanaugh. Eric was a cousin of mine, but we weren't close. Maybe it was a side-effect of the work we did, but families—beyond the immediate unit of parents and children—didn't spend a lot of time together. Perhaps because we didn't have a lot of free time and our main family unit spent most of its time training. Even if we had been close, Eric was a professional and would never have given me special treatment.

He nodded grimly to us, and we filed out onto the sidewalk without a single word. The street in front of the looming office building had already been cleared in preparation for our arrival. Although, the human police had no idea who we actually were or what we were doing there. Only the most highest up in law enforcement knew of our existence and helped pave the way for these little excursions.

Although, the deserted sidewalk was a plus, it was also an annoyance. Gentry Technologies would have had ample time to prepare for our attack after the warning we'd given them. I was kind of looking forward to a fight—a way to expend all this nervous tension that had been building up inside my muscles—but I was hoping to have the element of surprise on our side. It was bad enough to be fighting in an area controlled by the Fey, but giving them time to prepare virtually ensured an ambush.

That was all warrior whining, though. The Council had made the decision to clear the streets for good reason. They had weighed the options carefully and determined that innocent lives were more important than the extra risk to ours. It was the right

call and one which I would have made in their shoes. We signed up for this, they didn't. The possibility of an ambush sucked, but the possibility of civilian casualties sucked more. I guess sometimes that's what being a leader was about; choosing the path that sucked the least.

Tiernan and Aideen were right beside me as we entered the main lobby to find it completely deserted. The large windows which made up the entire front wall let in lots of light; illuminating the abandoned reception desk to our left and the empty waiting area with its collection of modern looking couches to our right. Large silver letters hung on the cream marble wall directly across from us; proclaiming that this was *Gentry Technologies.* I narrowed my eyes at the sign and tried to figure out what exactly bothered me about the name. The *Gentry* part wasn't too surprising, it wasn't even all that original; Gentry was another name for the Fey. But the *Technologies* addition made it seem like an oxymoron. Fairies had magic, they didn't need technology; and that's what bugged me. If the Fey combined their magic with our technology, they could do anything. They could... create biological weapons and destroy us all. I sighed and silently called myself an idiot as I realized that even if we won today, this was merely a skirmish; the war had just begun.

I let go of my doomsday thoughts to look around again. There were elevators to our right, just past the waiting area, and across from us, beneath the silver sign, were three, polished, wood doors; each with security panels set into the wall beside them. A glance to my left showed two more doors just past the reception desk. One was marked; *stairs* and the other; *parking.* Lots of places for fairies to jump out of but none did. It was just us in our black suits; stark against the perfect shine of the empty room.

I wasn't surprised by that. It made sense to lure us into a location of their choosing. With this being a fairy business, there could be anything waiting for us on the upper floors; perhaps even a lack of floor entirely. We could walk out into empty air or onto

water... or into a Sluagh ambush. I forced my tight throat to swallow and glanced at Tiernan. His look was not reassuring.

“Ms. Evergreen.” Eric came up to us. He cast me a quick side-nod in acknowledgment before focusing his dark eyes back on Aideen. “We're relying on you to direct us. Where's the lab?”

“The fourth floor,” Aideen said immediately and waved a hand toward the elevators.

“The elevators are too risky.” Eric shook his head. “We're doing this as planned; we go up the stairs.”

“They're right there.” Aideen pointed at the door marked *stairs* with a look that clearly said she didn't think he needed her for that.

“All right, let's move.” Eric didn't even notice her look; he simply waved the group of extinguishers forward. “Ms. Evergreen, you have your comm link on, right?” He touched his hand to a spot on the side of his helmet.

“Yes.” Aideen moved her hair and a little ear bud with a small extended microphone was revealed.

“Good. I want you three to bring up the rear, but I'll still need you to guide me through the link,” he said.

“I'll get you there.” She nodded nervously.

Eric didn't even reply, just ran for the stairs and edged his way in front of the extinguishers filing into the open door. He disappeared from sight, probably heading to the front, as we got into place behind the others and began running up the metal staircase; creating enough noise to wake the dead.

Which is what we'd be if they caught us in those close quarters. An icy cold was working its way down my spine. I knew the elevators would have been worse but suddenly the stairwell

seemed more like a very tall coffin than a means of getting up to the lab. Someone could come out of one of the top floors and simply lob some fairy magic down at us. It would be like one of those carnival games; Shoot the Extinguisher. I bet they'd win first prize.

"We're here," I heard Eric through my own earpiece. "It's empty... wait. What the hell?" Then there was a loud crackling and the communication faded into an obnoxious, buzzing tone.

"Fuck!" The men ahead of us swore and rushed up the stairs, but Aideen grabbed me and pulled me through a door marked; 2.

Tiernan followed behind me, and the three of us came out onto the second floor; a dark, open space sectioned off by cubicles. There were offices on our right but the doors were shut and no sunlight made it through to us. Aideen started running down the aisle in front of the offices still holding my hand.

"Wait!" I tried to pull back, but she was stronger than she looked. "We've got to help them! I can't just run away! What are you doing? Aideen!"

"How?" She finally stopped and stared at me with huge, frightened eyes. "How are we going to help them?!"

Then a low growl came from the far left of the room. I froze and turned toward a growing darkness there. The black cloud puffed up, larger and larger, so dark that it didn't seem to have substance at all. It was simply an empty void consuming everything in its path. Except that it wasn't empty. Creatures lurked within it; monsters who had haunted my dreams the night before. The Sluagh had arrived.

"Run!" Tiernan shouted as light began to fill his hands.

We ran. I followed closely behind Aideen who had angled into the cubicles and was weaving her way through them. Loud

crashes vibrated through the floor to us as the Sluagh moved forward; crushing everything that stood in its way. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a ball of light fly toward the oncoming nightmares, and I glanced back. The dark was pierced. Monsters cowered back from the invading light and shrieked. Then the strangest thing happened; the shadows formed by the golden light magic solidified and lashed out at the monsters; tendrils of black clawing at their eyes and other vulnerable places. The screaming intensified.

"This way!" Aideen shouted as she opened a door in front of us.

We rushed into another stairway; this one much narrower than the first. It spiraled downward like some relic from a Gothic novel. It was made of stained wood with intricately carved railings and it barely made a sound as we followed it down and down and down; much lower than the first floor would have been.

"Where are we going?" I asked Aideen.

"This is our only way out," Aideen shot back as she continued to hurry down the steps.

Above us came the distinctive racket of a door being slammed open and then the more horrifying sound of things sliding down that staircase after us. Slurping, rasping, and scratching noises which made the muscles in my back tighten in terror. Aideen slipped and almost fell, but I grabbed her arm and steadied her. Tiernan shot another ball of light back up the way we'd come and the Sluagh screamed again. I swallowed roughly; wondering what kind of magic could make the darkness turn upon itself.

You should *fear the darkness.* Those words filled my head like a prophecy or a promise.

"Hurry!" Aideen had finally reached the bottom step but as she ran forward, I stumbled, and Tiernan had to catch me.

“A rath,” Tiernan whispered as he held me.

“I've never seen a fairy mound before,” I whispered back, and we stood there clinging to each other; staring at the impossible scene laid out before us like a couple of hillbillies in the big city for the very first time.

An open field of grass languished across what should have been a cold cement floor and instead of fluorescent lights overhead, sunlight flooded the room from an unknown source. I looked up but all I saw was bright light; no ceiling or sky. The grass was thick beneath my feet, spotted with jewel-toned flowers, and in the center of it rose a small hill. Just a mound of grass-covered earth, no more than ten feet tall. But set into the side of that mound was a gold door with an inlay of a silver star near its top. Metallic rays shone down from the star's spokes and beneath it was a detailed, silver castle with towers reaching up toward the starlight, and an ethereal, silver forest surrounding it. Aideen was already opening the door.

“Come on!” She shouted at us, and Tiernan urged me forward.

“She's right; this is our best option for eluding the Sluagh.” Tiernan pulled me with him and then, when that became too much effort, he simply picked me up and started to run.

“It's Fairy,” I spoke in a hushed tone; as if I were in church. “I've never been to Fairy.”

“Well, hold on, sweetheart,” Tiernan said as he reached the door. “The first step is the hardest.”

Chapter Sixteen

The first step is the hardest. Yeah, you could say that. As soon as we crossed over into the Fairy Realm, I was saturated by a wave of magic so strong that the breath fled my body. Magic seemed to burst through all of my cells; permeating my very DNA. Like saltpeter set to flame, it sparked and popped beneath my skin; an explosion of pain. A scream clawed its way up my throat, and I convulsed in Tiernan's arms until he laid me down on a soft patch of grass. I heard the slam of a door and then Aideen's face was added to his above me.

“Seren?” Tiernan wrenched off my helmet and cast it aside so he could run a gentle hand over my face. “Why is she having this reaction?” His distraught gaze shot to Aideen who immediately looked away.

“I don't know.” Aideen's eyes were fastened on a golden door to her left. “But we can't stay here. The Sluagh will be right behind us. I have a place where we can hide her.”

“Lead on.” Tiernan picked me up, and I groaned, but the pain seemed to be over and my body was filling with a sublime tingling sensation. Like sunlight but softer, moonlight but warmer; something in between.

My head lolled against Tiernan's chest; the rough material of his body armor irritating my sensitive skin. I rolled my face away from it with lethargic vexation. His gait was smooth but rushed and the gentle jouncing left my head hanging back over his bicep. Disjointed images flickered in and out of my vision. Flashes of an alien forest filled with alien creatures. Trees seemed to leer over me while peculiar beasts ran across their limbs. Vines dangled

down; spiraling tendrils uncurling to clasp at me while their blossoms opened and closed like hungry mouths. My eyes darted side-to-side as my limp limbs draped uselessly in Tiernan's arms.

Flares of light sparkled through the trees, flitting about as if they were alive, and haunting calls echoed around us. The cries vibrated in my ears; pulsing and thrumming like warbled sound effects before settling into an enchanting melody. Layers of scent gave glimpses of what I couldn't see; luscious berries, sharp citrus fruits, and something syrupy sweet like mangoes ruled over the softer aromas of crushed grass, fecund soil, and crisp water. Then came a pungent base note of fertile decay; rich like patchouli. The perfume of the forest lured me like an exotic lover; arms open and lips smiling. It banished any unease I may have felt and my eyes drifted shut as I breathed deeper. The brush of flora against my skin became a gentle caress, and I sighed as a sense of peace washed over me.

Was this fairy magic? Were my charms ineffective around so much of it? Where was my sword? I reached down to pat the sheath attached to my thigh. I'd worn my short-sword simply because it was easier to maneuver with. It was still there, but touching it didn't bring me the comfort it normally did. Perhaps because I didn't need comfort. I let go of my suspicions and embraced the peace which had been offered; instantly feeling like a newborn, experiencing the world with fresh senses. A world which felt like a mother to me.

We stopped moving, and I opened my eyes to see Aideen standing before a massive tree trunk. I cast my gaze up and followed the trunk to its grand branches; the emerald leaves rustling in a light breeze. I smiled and the branches seemed to wave to me in welcome. It was such a silly notion that I smiled wider.

When I looked back at Aideen, she had her hand against the trunk and a portion of it was glowing. The glow brightened and grew until it disappeared with a sparkling burst and a door-shaped

opening was revealed. The three of us rushed through; Tiernan's hands tightening against me. As soon as we were inside, Aideen touched the trunk again and it closed seamlessly behind us with another soft glow.

Tiernan laid me down on a squishy mattress and the loamy scent of moss wafted up from it. I immediately swayed upright to peer around me; my curiosity conquering my fatigue. The inside of the tree was completely hollow; the trunk polished to a golden sheen. There was a dainty staircase along one side; curving up and disappearing into the ceiling above us. The ceiling itself was obscured by woven branches and in several places the branches bulged out; creating cages for glowing lights that brightened as I watched.

There were bookshelves flowing out from the trunk in several places; filled with leather-bound books, shards of crystal, rocks, feathers, and unknown objects. The furniture seemed to rise smoothly from the floor, including the round bed I was sitting on which was also connected to the wall. Vines trailed from the ceiling; veiling the bed near the trunk. There were white flowers blossoming among the vines, releasing their delicate perfume into the air, and the lime silk comforter was scattered with fallen petals.

Over to one side of the room was what appeared to be a kitchen with a sink also molded from the trunk, a wide counter, and a stone-lined fireplace whose chimney went straight up the side of the tree. Cupboards above the sink and counter had no doors; open shelves showcasing an assortment of mismatched china. There was a small table growing right out of the floor in front of the kitchen and a couple of chairs tucked away beneath it. On the table's center, a large porcelain pitcher held a collection of silverware like flowers.

Between me and the kitchen there was a thick rug on the floor which looked as if it was woven of the same vines that draped the bed. There were two rocking chairs sitting on it; one with a knit blanket folded over it. Although, there were no

windows, the place felt open and fresh; probably because of all the plant life. I wondered how it all grew without sunlight and then looked up at the glowing lights suspiciously.

“Where are we?” I whispered.

“This is my home.” Aideen smiled gently at me. “My tree. We'll be safe here.”

“The Sluagh?” I looked over at Tiernan.

“They won't be able to sense us inside the tree,” he assured me as he divested himself of the bulky body armor. “How are you feeling, Seren?”

“Better now.” I sighed and lowered my feet to the floor. “I didn't know entering Fairy would be so painful.”

“It shouldn't have been.” Tiernan frowned at me and then shot Aideen a sharp look. “There's only one reason for Fairy to affect you like that.”

“Tiernan”—Aideen laid a hand on his shoulder, she'd removed her body armor as well but she still looked strange in the black combat clothes that had been beneath—“let me do this. I'm afraid I owe you both some explanations.”

“What did you do?” I narrowed my eyes at her.

“Nothing bad.” Aideen gave me a guilty smile. “Look, let's start with the facts. You've never been to Fairy, right? Isn't that strange for an extinguisher? Don't all of you make at least one trip over here after you've been trained?”

“Well, yeah, I guess.” I frowned. “My mom wanted to take me herself but there was never a good time and then—”

“She was murdered,” Aideen said matter-of-factly.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Seren, there's something I need to tell you about your mother.” Aideen's face was starting to blur, and I blinked rapidly in an effort to regain focus.

A delicious lethargy was overtaking my body and with it came a sweet, tingling rush. I felt so good; like I did when I drank too much whiskey. Except this was brighter, almost effervescent; champagne instead of whiskey. It was distracting, and I felt my attention wavering.

“Seren?” Aideen knelt before me but that only made it worse. I could make out the shape of her head but that was all. She seemed to look over her shoulder at Tiernan as she urgently asked, “What time of day is it?”

“Dusk,” came the grim reply. “Aideen, please tell me she's not what I think—”

That's when I blacked out.

Chapter Seventeen

“I do not appreciate being manipulated,” Tiernan's terse voice woke me.

I felt strange; my skin vibrated with energy, my fingertips tingled, and my heart beat wildly. There was something in the air; a gentle swaying heat. A pulsing like laughter on my lips. I breathed it in and it rushed through me; seeming to light up all the dark places within. It was amazing; leaving me more refreshed than I'd ever felt. Power zipped through my veins as if it were alive, as if it knew where it needed to go. I *felt* alive; a feeling which had me wondering if I'd ever truly lived.

“You were not supposed to hunt me,” I heard the end of Aideen's answer. “We believe that to be the work of King Uisdean, as was the Sluagh.”

“He wants her dead,” Tiernan's grim reply came from somewhere above me.

“Yes, I'm afraid so,” Aideen said. “Which is why we needed her to come home at last.”

“Well, it explains my strange attraction to her.” Tiernan sighed, and I felt movement against my cheek. I was lying on his lap; my armor had been removed but my sword remained.

“Yes, I admit I found your confusion amusing,” Aideen's voice gentled. “It was perfectly clear to me. Of all the seelie, your magic, my Lord Shadowcall, would be the most suited to blending with hers.”

“Well, now *I'm* confused so one of you had better start

talking.” I startled them both as I sat up. A rush of magic sped through my head as I blinked my eyes open, and I rubbed at my temples to try and ease the ache. They both gaped at me, and I frowned. “What?”

“Her eyes,” Tiernan whispered.

“I told you.” Aideen recovered first and smiled brightly.

“What about my eyes?” I panicked and tried to stand up but the room shifted out of focus, and Tiernan caught me.

“Easy, Seren.” He helped me sit back down. “You're okay; I've got you.”

“But what about my eyes?” I looked over at him and saw him blink as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

“Do you know what your name means in the Welsh tongue?” Tiernan's hand lifted and pushed back the hair at my temple. I saw a flash of color in the corner of my eye, and I started to turn toward it, but he gently shifted my chin back so I'd face him.

“Of course, I do,” I said impatiently. “It means *star*. My mother always called me her little star. That's why she gave me this necklace.” I waved a hand at my throat; forgetting that my star was hidden beneath my thick shirt.

“Your mother named you?” Aideen asked gently.

“Well, I'm sure my father had a say in it as well.” I frowned. I wasn't sure, actually.

“Yes, I'm absolutely sure that your father did have a say.” Aideen gave a little laugh.

“That's unkind of you,” Tiernan growled at her.

“Sorry.” She pouted.

“What?” I narrowed my gaze at him. “Why is it unkind?”

“Seren,” Tiernan's voice dropped to a whisper and his eyes filled with remorse. “Aideen is thinking only as a fairy; she doesn't understand what kind of heartbreak this will bring you. I do, and I'm sorry for it. Please know, before we tell you any more, that I was not a part of this. I had no idea what was happening, and I wouldn't wish to bring you unhappiness ever. Still, I think it could be wonderful for you if you decided to embrace it.”

“You're starting to scare me,” I growled, “*and* piss me off. Just tell me what the hell is wrong with my eyes.”

“Just look for yourself.” Aideen produced a mirror gleefully. “It's really amazing.”

“Aideen,” Tiernan groaned as I held the hand mirror up to my face. “You could have eased her into it.”

A stranger looked back at me. I mean, it was me, I recognized the angle of my jaw, my full lips, and my high cheekbones. I knew the long slope of my nose and the wings of my eyebrows. What I didn't recognize were my hair and eyes.

In place of my mossy-green irises were two brilliant emerald discs that shone unnaturally bright from my face; almost like faceted jewels. Within the green—surrounding the edge of my pupils—were silver spokes shooting outward. They seemed to be laid over my irises; shedding light upon them as if they were...

“Stars,” I whispered and lifted a hand to my face. Then I shifted my starry stare to my hair.

Just above my left temple was a streak of dark purple that faded down to lavender at the ends. My eyes followed it and noted that even the length of my hair had changed. Instead of ending just past my shoulders, my hair now curled down below my hips. It had surged free of the braid I'd confined it in the day before; like an invasive vine overtaking a garden. I dropped the mirror on the bed

and stood.

“What have you done to me?!” I shouted in horror.

“Seren.” Tiernan stood and held out a calming hand. “No one did this; you were born this way.”

“I can say with absolute certainty that *this* was not the way I was born!” I waved a hand over my face.

“Why aren't you happy?” Aideen frowned. “You're so beautiful. I'd love to have stars in my eyes.”

“Shut up, Aideen!” Tiernan pointed an angry finger at her. “I should have known something unscrupulous was afoot as soon as I discovered you were a Night Queen. Sweet Danu, I should have known when they told me you worked at Gentry. King Keir would never condone research on biological weapons! But I'd thought that maybe he was being betrayed, maybe someone was using his research in ways he'd never intended, and maybe you were the key to stopping the traitor.”

“Thank you for not saying anything,” Aideen said meekly.

“You counted on that,” Tiernan growled. “On my blind loyalty to the Twilight Court! You knew I'd never betray King Keir but that is the very reason you should have told me about her.”

“I couldn't,” Aideen whispered. “I was sworn to secrecy.”

“The Twilight Court?” I frowned. “What are you talking about? There's no such thing as a Twilight Court.”

“Humans aren't told of it,” Tiernan gentled his tone to speak to me. “Not even the Extinguishers or members of the Human Council.”

“Wait, no, forget this stupid court,” I growled. “What happened to me?”

“Please, Seren.” Tiernan waved a hand to a rocking chair. “Sit down.”

“I think I'll stand.” I crossed my arms resolutely.

“Fine, but this is going to take awhile.” Tiernan sighed. “There are actually three courts of Fairy.”

“I said I don't care about that damn court,” I snarled.

“It's important to the explanation for all of this.” Tiernan waved a hand at me, and I quieted. “There is the Seelie Court, which is the Court of the Light, the Unseelie Court which is also known as the Court of the Dark, and then there is the Twilight Court, the Court of the In-Between.”

“In-between what?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Everything,” he said and shrugged. “They rule dusk and dawn, the time between seasons, and the spaces that lie between; such as that between earth and sky.”

A shiver coasted over my skin as my body tried to tell my mind something that it didn't want to know. Tears sprang to my eyes, but I blinked them away.

“Go on,” I pushed the words past my cold lips.

“They rule that in nature which is neither Dark nor Light,” Tiernan continued. “Things like trees which flower in the darkness.” He glanced at Aideen. “Animals who roam at dusk and dawn. The eve of all things, the paths between realms, the silence between heartbeats... everything *between*. Their court is full of half-breeds; fairies who are both seelie and unseelie. It is a solace for those who are cast out.” He swallowed visibly and looked away from me briefly. “I myself have lived among them. In fact, I've given King Keir my fealty, and although I was born seelie, I'm now a twilight fairy.”

“What?” I blinked. “You were cast out of the Seelie Court?”

“That's a story for another time,” he said. “Seren, I'm so sorry to tell you this but it seems that your mother, in human perspective, was unfaithful to your father.”

“Excuse me?” I growled and lowered my arms. “Take that back.”

“She had an affair with a fairy.” Tiernan glanced at Aideen.

“A king!” Aideen added as if that made up for my mother's indiscretion. “King Keir of the Twilight Court.”

“Uh-huh.” I narrowed my gaze at her, and she flinched.

“King Keir is your real father,” Aideen's voice lowered to a more uncertain timbre.

“No, he's not.” I went back to crossing my arms.

“I believe the proof of his parentage lies within your eyes, Seren,” Tiernan whispered. “King Keir has the same star eyes. He's the only fairy—before you, that is—to have them.”

“I am not a fairy!” I shouted and stamped my foot like a five-year-old. A shower of stars burst upwards from the floor as if I'd just stepped on a balloon full of them. I gaped at my feet and started to tremble.

“Okay.” Tiernan held up his hands as he and Aideen backed away from me. “Then why did that just happen? Why did your body react to the magic when you crossed into Fairy? Why did magic overtake you right at twilight and then transform you into this?”

“I don't know,” I whispered.

“Those unseelie fairies who came after you,” he began

again. “My soldiers. We believe the Unseelie King ordered them to kill you. They, as well as the Sluagh, took you high into the air so you couldn't levitate. I'm guessing that your gifts are stronger when you do so. Am I right?”

“I...” I thought about it. “Yes, I guess my psychic abilities seem stronger when I levitate.”

“Because you're touching Fairy when you tread the in-between; connecting to the source of your magic,” Tiernan explained. “The path from the Human Realm to Fairy is a very powerful in-between place. Your dormant fey blood was awakened when you passed through it. Then, with the arrival of twilight, you transformed fully.”

“I'm not a fairy,” I whispered as I crumpled to the floor. I sank my fingers into the thick weave of the rug beneath me; crushing the fibers and releasing a fresh, green scent. It seemed to clear my head a little.

“Yes, you are.” Tiernan knelt on the floor before me and pulled me against his chest. “I'm so sorry, but you are.”

I began to cry. I couldn't help it. My whole life was not my own. My father wasn't my real father and my mother... she had lied to me from the moment of my birth. I couldn't be an extinguisher if I was a fairy. I shouldn't even be able to hold an iron sword. The thought perked me up.

“Why can I touch iron, if I'm a fairy?” I asked Tiernan defiantly as I laid my hand on the hilt of my weapon.

“A bonus of being only half fey,” Aideen answered as Tiernan cast the sword a wary look. “You get the best of both worlds. A fairy who is immune to iron. That alone could make you fearsome.”

“No.” I let go of the sword and grabbed Tiernan as if he could change everything.

“I'm so sorry, Seren,” he said again. “Truly, I understand what it means to be lost and not know who your family is.”

“My father; does he know?” I looked over at Aideen.

“No; Extinguisher Ewan doesn't know,” she assured me. “Although, he does now.”

“What do you mean?” I asked in a low voice.

“This has all been your father's plan.” Aideen gave me a guilty smile. “Your *real* father, King Keir. When your mother was murdered, he started devising a way to bring you to Fairy so he could protect you.”

“Was my mother murdered because of him?” I started to get angry.

“Yes and no,” she said. “Your mother was the only human to know who you really are; the heir to the twilight throne. King Keir has no other children, no wife, and no lovers. He loved your mother dearly and has paid just as dearly for it.”

“I don't understand,” I huffed.

“King Keir's brother is King Uisdean of the Unseelie,” Tiernan took over. “Uisdean hates humans and the thought of one sitting on his brother's throne must be—”

“Irksome,” Aideen finished. “King Keir, *our* king, believes his brother has sided with their nephew Bress, son of their sister. Bress would be in line for the twilight throne if you didn't exist.”

“So, first Uisdean kills my mother and then he decides that's not enough and tries to kill me?” I clarified.

“King Uisdean seems to have believed that killing your mother would have been enough to prevent you from learning of your heritage, but when he discovered your father's plans to bring you to Fairy, he must have decided to eliminate your threat

entirely," Tiernan said gently. "At least, that's what we've surmised. We can be sure of nothing yet, but the Unseelie King is one of the few nobles who can command the Sluagh."

"So, it's a safe bet that my uncle wants me dead," I concluded.

"Yes." Tiernan nodded.

"How does my father know that I'm not his daughter?" I asked Aideen.

"You mean your human father?" She asked, and when I nodded, she continued. "Well, you see, this whole biological weapon thing was kind of a ruse."

"Pardon me?" I glared at her.

"We needed a way to get you into Fairy," she said. "We knew you were an extinguisher—"

"I *am* an extinguisher," I interrupted.

"Oh, um, well, I don't see how you'll be able to continue that." Aideen looked at Tiernan for help, but he just shook his head at her and left her to flounder.

"Just go on," I growled.

"There is no weapon to kill humans," she admitted. "It was all a diversion so the other courts wouldn't know you were being taken to Fairy. Gentry Technologies is owned by your father, King Keir. If it weren't for the Sluagh attacking, there wouldn't have been any danger at all. I was supposed to get you there and lead you into Fairy, that was it."

"And my father?" I asked in as calm a tone as I could muster.

"Your human—?" She paled when she saw my glare. "Yes,

well, Dylan was supposed to be there to explain the proceedings to the Extinguishers."

"Dylan Thorn; the fairy you supposedly murdered?" I asked.

"Yes." Aideen gave me a guilty little smile. "We thought his appearance would help to prove the validity of our story. He was meant to ask for their patience and understanding since this is a delicate circumstance in which the life of a fairy princess is in danger. I'm sure someone has already informed Ewan Sloane that he is not your biological father."

"A fairy princess?" I frowned.

"She means you, Seren," Tiernan explained.

"I am not a fairy princess!" I shouted, and Tiernan cringed a little as a sparkling light illuminated his face. I held up my hand, slowly bringing it toward me, and determined that the light was emanating from my eyes.

"Close your eyes and breathe deeply." Tiernan's hands went to my face. "It's going to be okay, Seren. It's just going to take a little time for you to adapt."

"You *are* the Twilight Princess," Aideen said happily, with just a hint of awe in her tone.

"I'm the what?" I opened my eyes and was relieved to find that they'd stopped shining like spotlights.

"The Princess of the Twilight Court," Tiernan clarified.

"The Twilight Princess," Aideen affirmed again.

"Do not ever call me that," I ground out.

"What's wrong with being the Twilight Princess?" Aideen asked.

“Too many damn vampire jokes,” I snarled, and Tiernan choked back a laugh.

“Vampires?” Aideen looked baffled.

“*Twilight* is the title of a human motion picture about vampires,” Tiernan explained. “It's a story; entertainment, like theater.”

“Which makes that title into a joke.” I rolled my eyes. “As if it weren't bad enough to be a fairy princess. I swear; if my skin starts to sparkle, I'm going to scream.”

“Doesn't every little girl want to be a fairy princess?” Aideen asked in a small voice. “And what's wrong with sparkly skin? It sounds lovely. It would be a perfect compliment to your eyes.”

“I don't think extinguisher girls are raised to want the same things as other girls,” Tiernan spoke to Aideen but was staring at me with a strange look.

“What?” I lifted a brow at him. “Is there something else I should know about?”

“Just that our relationship is no longer a problem.” He grinned wickedly. “It looks as if we're better suited than you thought.”

“Oh.” I stared into his captivating eyes and realized that he was just as fascinated with my own.

Chapter Eighteen

“Come with me.” Tiernan held a hand out to me.

“Where are we going?” I glanced over at Aideen where she stood in the kitchen; packing us some food for our trip to the Twilight Court.

She just smiled and nodded.

“I have something I want you to see.” He motioned me upstairs. “Come on, I promise you'll enjoy it.”

I took his hand, and he led me to the stairs. I had spent the night on the third floor; in one of Aideen's guest bedrooms. She had slept in another guest bedroom on the second floor while Tiernan had taken her usual bed on the first floor; just in case someone made it through the enchanted trunk. It was an odd feeling to have someone protecting me, and I bristled a bit to be put in the position of damsel in distress, but Tiernan wouldn't budge. My safety had become their priority and my ability to defend myself was only to be used as a last resort. Well, we'd see about that.

I let go of my irritation and focused on the tree house. Aideen's home was amazing although I'd been a little too distracted to appreciate it the night before. Now, with Tiernan leading me up those smooth wood steps, I could enjoy the ingenuity of the circular levels. We climbed up past the two bedrooms; each one spanning the entire width of the tree with only the hole for the stairs breaking up the expanse of floor.

The staircase just kept swirling upwards, and we kept following it, room after room falling away beneath us; filled with

interesting things I wanted to stop and investigate, but Tiernan kept urging me upward. The trunk began to narrow; the rooms getting smaller until they were just storage spaces. Then we came to a trap door in the ceiling set with brass hinges. Tiernan opened it and lowered a final set of steps. We went up them and emerged on the final platform.

I inhaled sharply as I stepped out into open air and found myself standing among the treetops. Branches rustled around us—about waist high on me—granting an unimpeded view of the entire forest. Birds swooped past; calling out to us with cheerful songs before diving through the thick cover of leaves. The treetops looked like fluffy hills from where we stood, as if I could climb over them and lay down on those uppermost branches to safely slumber. A new landscape had been revealed to me; another world where wings were needed to fully explore.

“Welcome to Fairy.” Tiernan laid a hand on my back. The heat of his palm seeped through the thin cotton of my black shirt.

“It's beautiful.” I turned to him with a soft smile.

“Look.” He slid closer so that he was pressed against my side as he held his free hand up to point off to our left. “There's the fairy mound we came through.”

I followed his hand to where the trees fell away; outlining a small meadow with a hill in its center. Sunlight flashed off the golden door set into the mound, and I took a deep breath, hardly believing that I was there, in Fairy. I had come through that golden door and been changed forever.

“Seren”—Tiernan leaned his face down next to mine—“I brought you up here because I wanted you to see how wonderful this could be. Fairy has so many magical things for you to discover. You're not an outsider anymore; you belong here and her secrets will be revealed to you.” His hand slid down from my back to snake around my waist. Then he pulled me close as he shifted us

and pointed in the opposite direction. “That's where we're headed. Do you see the glimmer on the horizon?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“That's the Twilight Castle.” He smiled softly. “And all of this is the Twilight Kingdom. This is your home. No cement monstrosities to mar it or machines billowing poison into the air. Fairy bears none of the scars mankind has left upon the Earth. We work with her instead of against her. Isn't she beautiful?”

“She is,” I agreed, but I couldn't bring myself to smile.

“I know this is a lot for you to accept.” Tiernan turned to face me. “But I'll help you. You're not alone.”

“Thank you.” I sighed as his arms came around me, and he hugged me gently against his chest. The pound of Tiernan's heart in my ear calmed my anxiety, and I was able to pull back and take another look at the Twilight Kingdom.

It didn't appear all that unusual from up there. Beautiful, yes, but unusual? Not really; not beyond that golden door which I could just barely glimpse and the castle which was just a shimmer of light in the distance. The forest was wild and filled with unusual creatures but up there, above the treetops, I couldn't see them, and I could pretend I was surveying a normal forest in the Human Realm. The pretense helped relax me even further, even though I knew it was a lie. It didn't matter, I needed to be eased into this, given a little more time to process. So, I took the comfort of the illusion and backed away from Tiernan.

“What did you do to the Sluagh, back at Gentry?” I shifted my gaze up to his.

“What do you mean?” Tiernan started to push back the hair at my temple, but I took his hand and resolutely pulled it down.

“The thing with the light and then the dark,” I clarified.

“The way the darkness seemed to attack them. That was you, wasn't it?”

“Yes,” he admitted as he waved a hand toward the floor and then sat; casually leaning against the low wall of trunk that circled the platform. I sat next to him as he continued. “It's a family trait. We're the only seelie who can use our light magic to control the shadows it creates.”

“That's why your name is Shadowcall?” I cocked my head at him.

“Precisely.” Tiernan gave me a small smile and reached for me again, but I took his hand and just held it so he'd stop trying to touch me.

Things had become a little awkward between us now that we knew there was nothing forbidding an intimate relationship. Tiernan had begun to act as if we were already a couple, and I had responded with wishy-washy evasiveness that left him looking confused. As he did now. The thing was; *I* was confused. I didn't know what my life was anymore so how could I start a romantic relationship?

Then I would look at Tiernan and think that he was the only solid thing I had and maybe I should hold onto him. Thus, the hot and cold which he didn't deserve. This little gesture of bringing me up into the treetops had me wanting to cling to him again, but I'd never been a clingy woman, and I didn't want to become one now. I knew I was just feeling vulnerable because of all the sudden changes, and I didn't want that to influence our relationship. Tiernan would have to wait until I figured this all out.

“Something I heard Aideen say to you right before I woke up has had me wondering about your magic, but even after you've explained that thing with the shadows, I still don't understand.” I rubbed my thumb across his hand so he'd know I wasn't completely blowing off his advances.

“What's that?” Tiernan's hand closed; almost completely engulfing mine.

“She said that out of all the seelie, your magic would be the most suited to blending with mine.”

“Ah,” he whispered. “Well, we don't know exactly how your magic will manifest yet. Every fairy has their own unique ability in addition to that which they inherit. What we do know is that it will be a twilight magic; one born of Light and Dark.”

“Shadows,” I whispered, “and twilight.”

“Yes, a perfect pairing,” he lowered his voice to a purr, as if talking about our magic was an intimate thing.

“And this is why you're attracted to me?” I narrowed my eyes at him. The Fey may have different ideas of attraction, but he was about to find out that human women liked to be wanted for more than their magic.

“It's why I felt drawn to you,” he corrected, “and why I was able to give in to the attraction. Your fairy blood was letting me know it was all right.”

“And why would it not be all right?” I asked in a careful tone.

“It's not what you think,” he said softly. “This isn't about me hating humans. I don't hate them. Although, as I've told you before, I have little tolerance for them and even less interest on a personal level.”

“Then what is it about?” I felt my face ease into blank confusion.

“It's the magic,” he said and shrugged. “It guides us; like a very strong instinct. Fairy magic can be wild and erratic but there's calculation even in its capriciousness. It wants to flourish, as all

things do, and the best way for it to thrive is to magnify itself by bringing two powerful fairies together."

"So, how did I come to exist?" I lifted a brow and looked over at him. "If its goal is to bring two powerful fairies together, why did it allow my birth?"

We were both sitting with our legs drawn up, our bodies pressed together at shoulder and thigh, and our entwined hands in my lap. It felt comfortable but also strange. As if we shouldn't be at this point yet, but there we were, and I didn't want to move away from him.

"That is a very good question." Tiernan smiled slowly. "I believe you Extinguishers have been compounding your psychic gifts in a similar manner to us with the fairy magic. You said you were expected to marry another extinguisher. I assume this has been the way of things for several generations?"

"Yes, and it's resulted in some very powerful children," I agreed; realizing he was right.

We'd been doing exactly as the Fey had; keeping to ourselves and magnifying our power. So, how could I label him an elitist when I was a product of the same type of exclusion? Actually, I guess I wasn't. I was a product of both elitist groups. I wasn't sure if that made me a double elitist or an egalitarian.

"Your mother was one of those powerful extinguishers," Tiernan went on gently. "It seems as if the Fey magic took note of her human gifts and when she came into contact with the right fairy—a man who had magic that would complement hers as well as the power to protect the child born of their union—they were drawn together."

"Are you telling me that my mother's affair was all a manipulation to produce some powerful fusion of psychic gifts and fairy magic?" I gaped at him.

“I believe so,” he said gently. “It's hard to resist the pull of nature. We all have free will, of course, but nature knows how to twist us until we think we are the ones doing the choosing, when in fact, we're not.”

“So, our attraction to each other?” I didn't like where this was going.

“Means that our magic would blend well,” Tiernan said. “Stop right there, Seren.” He held a hand up. “I see the anger in your eyes. Don't judge this so quickly. Think about how human nature works for a second. Aren't some men more attractive to women not just because of how they look but because of how they smell?”

“What?” I frowned; my angry train derailed.

“Chemistry, I believe you call it.” He smirked. “It's pheromones; a way of nature telling the woman that this man will make a good father for her children, that their genes are compatible and will not produce mutations. It's when we go against these instincts, whether they be fey or human, that monsters are made.”

“Pardon me?”

“Maybe monster is too harsh a word for what happens when incompatible humans mate,” he conceded. “You get mutations, physical and mental, but we fey are magical beings and horrible things can happen when the wrong magic combines. Monstrous things. Where do you think the Sluagh came from?”

“You're saying that fairies who shouldn't have mated, did, and they produced those things that tried to kill us?” I gaped at him.

“Yes,” he said. “There are always those who want to go against nature; who find it thrilling to do things not socially accepted. Perversions.”

“Perversions?” I asked.

“A sidhe laying down with a puka; that sort of thing,” Tiernan explained.

“Wow.” I blinked in shock and then thought about it.

How many humans did things like that? Quite a lot actually. We even had names for all the sexual perversions in the Human Realm, there were so many of them. Why wouldn't they have such things in Fairy?

“How did the Twilight Court get all its...?”

“Courtiers?” He finished for me. “They are not the children of perversions; they are Danu's design. Their parents gave into their instincts, even though the Seelie and Unseelie Courts are at war and—”

“The Seelie are at war with the Unseelie?” I gaped at him again.

“Yes, we don't make it known to the humans.” Tiernan cleared his throat. “The only thing standing between them is the Twilight Court. It's neutral ground; neutral fey.”

“Like Sweden,” I huffed.

“If you wish.” He rolled his eyes. “Although, Sweden was a more apathetic neutral. Twilight stands as a buffer to prevent war; nothing apathetic about it. Getting back to the Twilight Fey; their parents followed their instincts despite politics, and the blended fey were born. Eventually, the Twilight Court was made to give them a home and unions between the Unseelie and the Seelie became even more common, though admittedly, some were not consensual. Battlefield babies, they're called.”

“Products of rape,” I said grimly.

“Yes; that,” he agreed. “Most unions are consensual,

though, and the fairy women who birth those babies do so knowing fully well that they will eventually give their children to the Twilight Court. It's considered a very honorable sacrifice."

"I... whoa." I exhaled slowly. "Mother Nature wanted the Twilight Court, and the Fey acceded to her wishes?"

"Yes, but it has become more than just a collection of the blessed children," he said. "It's become a place of refuge for those of us with nowhere else to go."

"Like you?" I asked gently."Will you tell me why you're a member of the Twilight Court?"

"It's not a pleasant story." Tiernan looked down at our joined hands.

"Tell me anyway," I whispered.

"My mother was a lady-in-waiting to the Seelie Queen," he began. "I was walking through court one day and saw the Queen strike my mother. I ran forward and when I saw the Queen's hand filling with magic, I stepped between them. The Queen was so enraged that she magnified the spell." Tiernan lifted a finger to the scar on his cheek as he continued to speak "She would have killed me, but my mother added her magic to the attack. The Silverlight. It's a gentle magic but an effective one. It transmutes anything harmful into a benign silver glow. This, combined with my mother's love for me, diminished the Queen's rending magic and instead of being torn to pieces, I received just one cut. I lived, but the magic left its mark; both of their magics did."

"That's why it's silver." I admired the swirling lines of his scar.

"Yes," he said. "Love and hate are forever entwined within my skin."

"And this is why you had to leave the Seelie Court?" I

asked.

“It is,” he confirmed. “My family was ashamed that I had stood against the Queen, even in defense of my own mother. Mother was forgiven for her intercession since she's actually a favorite of the Queen's, but my scar became a mark of shame upon my family. It was a constant reminder to the Queen that she could be thwarted, and the Seelie Queen doesn't like such reminders. So, I was asked to leave.”

“By who?”

“My father.” Tiernan met my eyes and shook his head. “I couldn't understand how he could allow my mother to be beaten by anyone, even our own Queen. We fought over it, and I left. It was for the best. If he hadn't pushed me into it, I would have been cast out secretly by the Queen's guard in a less pleasant fashion.”

“So, you left and went to the Twilight Court,” I concluded.

“Where I met your father.” He nodded. “Seren, there are very few nobles in Fairy who are actually noble. There's vicious cruelty and devious manipulations; more pleasure than there is love, and more scathing wit than genial humor. Your father is a true nobleman. He's kind and strong, honorable and humorous, and everything I want to be. He replaced my father in my heart long ago, and for me to find his daughter and bring her safely home to him is both an honor and pleasure.”

“Why did you join the Wild Hunt?” I asked; evading his obvious attempt to influence my opinion of a man I didn't know.

“That was also your father's doing.” Tiernan smiled in memory. “He secured me a place in the Hunt. It was a way to regain my honor and it has done exactly that. I've been able to prove my worth and, because of him, I've regained my pride.”

“You should never have felt ashamed of what you did in the first place,” I chided him. “Defending your mother is hardly a

crime. It would have been more criminal to have stood there and done nothing."

"It *is* a crime when you defend your mother against your monarch. I was a step away from being labeled a traitor." His jaw clenched. "Unfortunately, you will learn about all of this. I wish I could protect you from the cruel politics of our realm, but as a princess, it will become a large part of your existence. At least you will be living in the Twilight Court, where the political climate is mild."

"Living?" I blinked as it finally occurred to me that they expected me to stay in Fairy forever. "I can't stay here."

"What do you mean?" He blinked at me. "Where else would you go?"

"Home," I said instantly. "I can't just abandon my father. He may not be my father by blood, but he raised me. He's my Dad, and I'm all he's got."

"We'll talk about it later," Tiernan said evasively. "After you get settled and meet your fairy father."

"I won't abandon my Dad," I said more firmly.

"No one's asking you to," Tiernan reassured me.

Still, an aching knot began to form in my belly, and I knew the meaning of home was about to change for me. I looked up; through the lace of leaves and into the cloudless sky of Fairy as I let the illusion fall away. This wasn't the Human Realm, and I wasn't entirely human anymore. Pretending nothing had changed wasn't going to help me. I needed to face the truth and make a decision on where I really belonged.

Chapter Nineteen

“How many fairies want me dead?” I asked as we made our way through the forest to the Twilight Court. A thick vine snaked out from the underbrush and curled around my ankle just tight enough to make me stumble. “Damn it!” I growled and glowered at the vine as it slithered back into the brush. “I'm bigger than you, plant! I can uproot you!”

“Um, no you're not, and no you can't.” Tiernan nodded his head toward the shadows of the forest, and I caught sight of a giant, tear-shaped plant with fronds curling up into the tree branches above.

Vines as thick as my thighs fanned out from its base in all directions and the skeletons of dead animals littered the ground around it. The large leaves parted like the petals of a flower and a humanoid creature slithered out. She was entirely pale green—her skin slick like the inside of an aloe leaf—and completely hairless. Her arms ended in rubbery vines and so did her legs, but where her arms hung free, her legs were attached to the plant... which was the rest of her I guess.

“I just wanted to greet the Princess,” she said in a thick, wet voice and then smiled; showcasing a mouthful of vicious barbs. “Your Highness.” She bowed.

“Um, hello there,” I tried to sound cheerful. As one does when speaking to a carnivorous plant.

“We felt your awakening, Princess,” the green lady continued. “All of the Twilight Forest is rejoicing your arrival. May Danu bless you and protect you.”

“Thank you.” A warmth spread through me at her words and a response rose out of me without conscious effort. “May your roots grow deep and your leaves spread wide above you.”

The lady plant smiled wider and bowed again before she slid back into her leaves.

“How did you know the proper response to give a Lonnegawn?” Tiernan was gaping at me as we walked onward.

“I don't know.” I blinked as I automatically avoided stepping on a large red insect that went running by. Traversing the fairy forest was becoming easier. “I must have read about it in my *Fairy Lore* class.”

“We never provided the Extinguishers with information on the Lonnegawn.” Tiernan frowned thoughtfully.

“The answer to your earlier question is; a lot,” Aideen interrupted brightly.

“What?” I transferred my attention to her.

“You asked how many fairies want you dead,” she reminded me. “A lot of them do.”

“Aideen.” Tiernan rolled his eyes and then looked back at me. “There are those who share King Uisdean's opinion that a human should never sit on a fairy throne despite their royal parentage.”

“So, even if we make it to the Twilight Court, I'll never be safe,” I said with calm acceptance.

“Once you're confirmed as Princess, the threat will lessen significantly,” Tiernan insisted.

“Lessen but not disappear,” I huffed.

“Killing a fairy monarch or their heir is a crime punishable

by death at the hands of the Sluagh," Tiernan said grimly. "Even though the Unseelie King can command them, it doesn't make him immune to Sluagh justice. If he kills you after King Keir crowns you as his heir, the Sluagh will kill him and any whom he contracted to assist in your murder. No one will take that risk."

"I should have just stayed in the Human Realm," I grumbled.

"You would be dead if you'd stayed in the Human Realm." Aideen stopped walking to face me. "You need to understand this right now, Seren. Your father has spent your entire life protecting you. He has remained apart from the woman he loved because they both believed it would be safer to raise you as a human. Everything has been done out of love for you. If King Keir believes you are safer here in Fairy now, then it's because he has good reason to."

"And you expect me to just take your word for all of this?" I stared hard at her. "You, who lied and manipulated events to suit some ulterior motive. Why should I believe anything you say?"

Aideen looked stricken; gaping at me like a fish as branches drooped out of her hair, dropping delicate, fluted, green flowers all over the ground.

"Then trust *me*." Tiernan took my hand. "If you can't believe in Aideen, believe in me when I tell you that your father has your best interests at heart."

"You saved my life," I said, "and that's earned you a measure of trust, but I'll need to make my own decision about this fairy who claims to be my father."

"That's fair." Tiernan gave me a little smile. "I have enough faith in your perception to know you'll see what I do; an honorable man who's obviously your father."

A swarm of tiny fairies burst from the trees; delicate wings buzzing so fast that they became a blur. They circled us—sunlight

flashing off their tiny, obsidian swords—then came to hover before us. They all wore similar expressions of brash roguery on their faces and intricate tattoos on their bodies. One male pixie flew to the head of the group and sheathed his black sword. His mouth twisted up at one corner; adding to the carefree look of his tousled red hair and jaunty green leather jerkin.

"Tiernan." The little fairy man held out a fist, and Tiernan tapped it with a fingertip.

"Rath." Tiernan nodded. "You're patrolling today?"

"Scouting." Rath looked over at me and bowed. "Your Highness, your ascension has been noted and the Court is even now preparing for your arrival. King Keir has sent us out to scout for you, and I need to report your proximity so you may be escorted in properly."

"Um, okay." I blinked at Tiernan.

"She's an eloquent one, eh?" Rath smirked at Tiernan, who shook his head and laughed.

"Be off, impetuous pixie and make known my whereabouts to the Twilight Court," I intoned dramatically before lifting a brow at Rath. "Was that better?"

"Ah! She has her father's humor as well as his eyes." Rath bowed to me again. "I shall fly to your service, my Princess!" He made a motion with his hand, and the pixies did a swooping arch in front of us before darting off through the trees.

"Well, that was interesting." I rolled my eyes.

"You did well." Tiernan chuckled. "That was the perfect response to a pixie. They love royals who treat them with casual respect."

"I try to treat everyone with casual respect." I smirked.

“That may not be the best technique for the rest of the Fey.” He grimaced as we continued walking.

“His name was Rath?” I asked. “As in, a fairy mound?”

“The word rath means *royal seat.*” Tiernan smirked. “Rath's parents had high hopes for him.”

“To what? Be a pain in a royal's ass or just be a royal pain in the ass?” I huffed.

“Either would make them proud.” Tiernan laughed. “Pixies are all a bunch of miscreants at heart.”

“Tattooed miscreants,” I added.

“Well, that is how they got their name.” He shrugged.

“Right.” I nodded as I recalled my lessons on pixies. “Pixie, from the term pict-sidhe. Tattooed fairies.”

“There it is!” Aideen pointed excitedly, and I looked ahead to where the trees thinned.

A wide meadow, spotted with purple flowers, spread out beyond. In the center of the meadow rose a hill and at the peak of the hill perched a castle. It had a central steepled building surrounded by numerous towers and walls too high to even fantasize about scaling. The stone walls were a grayish lavender color—like the evening sky—and they gleamed in the sunlight. As we stepped out of the forest, a dirt path came into view. It led up to the main gates and down to a road which crossed horizontally in front of us. We headed straight for the path just as a group of mounted, fairy warriors came surging through the castle gates.

We reached the crossroads, and Tiernan motioned for us to stop. It only took a few minutes for the group of fairy riders to reach us. They were wearing hardened leather armor stained dark purple with black clothing beneath it but no helmets. Their

otherworldly beauty was on full display and their long hair streamed out behind them like colorful banners. White, yellow, crimson, green, and even blue; the colors of both hair and skin were as varied as any painter's palette.

I couldn't help but admire them. Most of the sidhe—the highest level of the Fey—were beautiful but when they were armored and on horseback, they especially appealed to my soldier's heart. I doubted even Lancelot himself could compete with a mounted fairy knight in the looks department. The thought had me smiling as they brought their gray horses to a stop just a few feet before us. The knights dismounted and bowed as one; in a choreographed maneuver which appeared effortless. Then a blue-haired fairy man stepped forward.

“Princess Seren, it's an honor to escort you home. I am Sir Torquil, and these are the men of the King's Guard.” He motioned to the men behind him. Then three horses were brought forward by one of the soldiers, and Torquil continued. “We've brought mounts for you as well; my Lord Tiernan, and my Lady Aideen.” He nodded to each of them before refocusing on me. “Please, allow me to help you onto your mount, Princess.”

I glanced at Tiernan, and he gave me a secret grin before he nodded. I went forward, and Torquil went down on one knee so I could use his armored thigh as a step. I climbed up and into the stirrup before hoisting my leg over the saddle. The saddle leather was inlaid with silver in dazzling designs and at both the front and back there were curved silver bars. I settled my weight into the perfectly contoured seat and noted that the leather didn't even creak.

The horse shifted, head tossing in unease, and I laid a hand against her neck automatically. A spark of energy flashed beneath my palm; some kind of reaction between our auras. She shivered against me and then neighed softly. A low murmur went through the knights, and I looked up to see astonished expressions on every face. I shook my head. What, they didn't think a human could

handle a fairy horse?

Aideen and Tiernan mounted their own horses; one of the knights helped Aideen but no one offered Tiernan assistance. I smiled to myself; thinking about what would have happened if they had. Then we turned around and headed toward the radiant castle atop the hill. The knights formed a living shield around us so that Tiernan, Aideen, and I were riding in the center of them. Their caution had me scanning the horizon in concern. What would happen if the Sluagh tried to attack us once again? Would it be worse there in Fairy where magic was supposedly stronger?

Then the castle loomed up before us, and I got a closer look at it. All thoughts of monsters melted away as I fell under its enchantment. It was too beautiful to ever be sullied by something like the Sluagh. Surely this exquisite edifice would shame them into hiding. The stone alone was intimidating. As translucent as precious gems, it caught the light within its heart; appearing to glow and pulse as if it were alive. The lowered gate was made out of the same material; columns of stone lashed together with silver bands.

Who made a gate out of stone? It seemed architecturally impossible and structurally unsound. Too delicate to withstand any attack and too difficult to lift. I doubted it would last very long against a single man armed with a pickax, much less an invading army equipped with catapults.

Then I felt the energy rippling off the castle like the vibrations from a struck gong. It was coursing through everything; the walls, the gate, even the ground. That pulsing glow within the stone wasn't a naturally occurring glimmer; it was fairy magic. The entire place was warded with amazingly strong enchantments; enough to make me a little dizzy. We stopped directly in front of the gate; close enough for me to actually see the waves of light thrumming within the thick bars. I looked up at the soaring arch supporting the gate and couldn't see any lifting mechanism or even a housing for the gate to slip up into.

“If you will please touch the portcullis, Your Highness?” Torquil asked formally.

“Why?” I peered around the courtyard beyond the bars, expecting to see some fairies awaiting our arrival, but it was empty. Where was everyone? This was a big castle to only house a few knights. Maybe no one else cared that their princess was here. Which was fine by me. I'd never been one to enjoy making a scene.

“This will be final proof of your lineage,” Tiernan explained. “The gate will open at the hand of King Keir's child. The rest of us must request entrance, but you will always be welcome... if you are truly the Twilight Princess.”

“Call me *Twilight Princess* again, and I will punch you in the nose,” I vowed and then nearly groaned when the knights around us inhaled sharply.

“Stop stalling,” Tiernan chided with a smile.

“Fine.” I sighed and urged my horse closer; edging her parallel to the gate. I placed a hand on one of the bars with obvious irritation; half hoping that nothing would happen.

The gate disappeared completely in a sparkling explosion of stars, and a rush of sound hit us as the true courtyard was revealed. This one was full of fairies, and they were all gathered near the gate; staring at us in fascination while murmuring among themselves excitedly. I reeled a little from the rush of magic that immediately coursed through me and leaned forward on my horse. She whinnied, almost as if she could sense my distress, and eased us back a little. I took a deep breath and steadied myself before I looked over to see Tiernan smiling widely.

So, it was confirmed then; I was a stupid, twilight, fairy princess.

I looked down at my dirty combat gear and then out at the assemblage of elegant fairies. I'd never felt so inadequate in all my

life. They were dressed in shining silk and velvet; long hair done up in elaborate hairdos to highlight beautiful faces which needed no make-up for enhancement. Mingling among these elite sidhe were lesser fey but even they made me feel out of place with their strangely beautiful attributes. Cat eyes peered at me from human faces, hooves poked out of the hem of pant legs, horns crowned haughty heads, and fluffy tails flicked beneath full skirts. There were leathery wings, scaled skin, and multi-colored fur; bodies ranging from very small to massive, and fairies who looked more like beasts than humans.

Then the crowd parted and a fairy man stepped through. He was tall with an athlete's build and skin as pale as my Irish complexion. He wore a simple blue tunic over black pants. A sword belt was strapped around his waist and the silver sword hanging from it shone brightly against his dark clothing. His only piece of adornment was a gold ring on his left hand; making him the most plainly dressed fairy there. As he strode forward, his long, amethyst hair flared behind him like a cape; the ends lightening to lavender like the stones of the castle... and the stripe in my own hair.

Torquil eased his horse around mine and led us forward into an empty space within the courtyard. I dismounted onto shaky legs and as I came around my horse, she followed me; trailing her reins across the stones. I stopped to watch the purple-haired fairy as he walked straight up to me, and I felt the horse nudge her nose into my back supportively. I kept having the dumbest thoughts, like how the courtyard stones were impossibly immaculate and how the air smelled as fresh as it had within the forest. I realized that I was on the verge of panic; distracting myself with inanities so I wouldn't bolt. I took a deep breath to calm myself.

I focused more fully on the man approaching me; continuing to breathe deeply and calmly. This was happening, and I had to deal with it. I had to keep my composure and do my best to represent the Extinguishers as well as I could. I would not allow

my first words to a fairy king to be about the cleanliness of his courtyard. As he drew closer, I realized that his hair wasn't completely purple. At the roots, it was actually black; lightening to purple about an inch down before it faded to lavender at the ends.

He stopped right in front of me and that's when I was finally able to see his eyes. They weren't exactly the same as mine. I must have inherited the green from my mother, even though my eyes were now much brighter than hers had been. This man's eyes were aubergine, which made the silver stars surrounding his pupils seem brighter. Those starry eyes filled with tears and then he grabbed me around the shoulders and pulled me into a fierce hug.

“Seren,” his voice was deep but broken by emotion. “My daughter. I've mourned every day I've had to live without you and your mother.”

He pulled back to look me over again, and I realized that I was crying too. Something inside me recognized him and connected with him immediately. I could almost feel it pulsating between us. His palm came to rest against my cheek, and he smiled through his tears.

“You have your mother's beauty,” he said softly.

“And a little of your hair,” I observed. “I was told about the eyes, but not the hair.”

“Yes.” He laughed. “It seems that we've named you well.” He skimmed a fingertip along my temple and then his eyes landed on my pendant. “You're wearing it.” He sighed in relief. “Good.”

“My star?” I frowned.

“I made this for you when you were born.” He inhaled deeply; as if he was trying to control his emotions.

“My mother gave it to me,” I whispered.

“Yes, I asked her to.” He took the pendant between his thumb and forefinger and it sparked lavender. I flinched back a little, and he laid a hand on my shoulder reassuringly. “It's condensed fairy magic,” he said. “I wasn't able to be there to watch over you as a father should so I made this to guard you against illness or accident.”

“This was from you?” I didn't know how to feel about it. Part of me was disappointed that the only thing I had left to remind me of my mother wasn't actually from her, but another part of me —the part which seemed to know this man already—was comforted by the thought that he had tried to look after me.

“It was from your parents.” He leaned down to lay a kiss on my forehead and just like that, the conflicted parts of me reconciled. Then he turned to Tiernan and Aideen. “Lady Aideen, you've done me a service I can never repay, and my Lord Tiernan, you were not expected to arrive with my daughter, but I'm grateful that Seren had you to guard her on her journey home. Thank you both.”

“Your Majesty”—Tiernan bowed—“it was an honor to bring the Princess home.”

“I'm happy to see you together at last, my King.” Aideen curtsied deeply.

“You must all come inside and refresh yourselves.” King Keir waved us forward; his arm threading through mine. “Tonight we will celebrate the return of my daughter, and tomorrow we will crown her as my heir.”

The crowd of fairies filling the courtyard cheered, but dread dug its claws deeply into me. It was all happening too fast; I couldn't keep up. I needed more time to process this; to figure things out and decide whether or not I wanted to be this man's heir before he actually stuck a crown on my head. That sounded pretty final.

The velvet nose of my fairy horse nuzzled my arm, and I stopped to turn to her. Keir stopped as well and grinned delightedly; nodding his encouragement. I stroked the soft muzzle, and she gave a little whine.

“I don't think you can follow me into the castle, horse,” I murmured to it. “Horses aren't meant to live in castles.”

The horse shivered; bones shifting beneath her skin, fur flowing, body shrinking and morphing until there was a huge, gray dog standing before me. She yipped once, shook her long gray coat to remove the reins and saddle from her body, and then sat there waiting in patient happiness. I sucked in a sharp breath and backed away; slamming into Keir's chest. The dog sat back, cocked her head at me, and then whined. No, not a dog, a...

“Puka,” I whispered in horror as my hand went for my sword. “It's a puka.”

“Easy now, Seren.” Tiernan was immediately beside me; his hand on my arm. “This is a *twilight* puka. See; she doesn't have the fire eyes of an unseelie puka. Your magic claimed her when you laid your hand on her. She will never hurt you. Look at her; she loves you already. Pukas, once claimed, are loyal to the death.”

I swallowed roughly and felt Keir's hand go to my other arm. My sword arm. I let go of the sword hilt and went forward; dislodging both well-meaning hands to stand and stare at the dog. She was so large—coming almost to my shoulder—that I didn't need to kneel to look her in the eye. Her soft, *brown* eyes. She gave another cautious whine, and I held my hand out to her. Her silky muzzle went beneath my palm and nudged upward; chasing away my anxiety immediately. This wasn't the animal who had killed my mother; this was a different beast entirely. I released a long sigh.

“All right then; I guess you can tag along,” I said to her, and she yipped happily.

Then I turned back to King Keir and Tiernan. They were both smiling at me as if I'd performed some incredible act of daring. I wanted to tell them to save their pride for when I faced an actual unseelie puka but that would have been petty of me. At least I had conquered a small part of my anger toward pukas; just enough to allow me to get over any connection between them and the twilight puka walking beside me.

Keir held his arm out to me, and I took it; letting him lead me up a set of steps and through a pair of immense, silver doors. A spacious room spread before us with a grand staircase directly in front of us. There were hallways tucked beneath the stairs to either side, leading back into the castle, and several doors to either side of the room. The ceiling soared as high as the stairs; allowing for a massive tapestry of a shadowy forest to hang above the doors on the left wall and a shining collection of weaponry above the doors on the right.

The inside of the castle was lined with the same stone as its exterior; polished to a glassy perfection which had me concerned. The floor looked like an accident waiting to happen, and I was glad I was wearing boots with good traction. It was beautiful, though; especially the silver star set into the center of the floor. Sunlight streamed in from tall windows behind me; making the star gleam as if it were truly a piece of the heavens set within the earth.

Just past the star were two soaring statues; one to either side of the base of the staircase. They were carved from opaque, white stone. One statue was of a sidhe woman and the other, a sidhe man. I stared at them as we passed through the space between them and began to climb the stairs. The puka followed beside me, but the other fairies stopped before the first step. I took one last look over my shoulder as we reached the landing and saw Tiernan staring up at me with a soft smile.

Chapter Twenty

Keir barely took his eyes off me as he led me through a winding corridor filled with extraordinary fairy art. Sculptures of strange creatures writhed under the serene gazes of regal sidhe portraits which hung next to intricate tapestries portraying scenes of astounding beauty. Everything was perfect and shiny; not a hint of dust or a single scratch to be found. I felt like a stain that needed to be scrubbed away.

“Your mother's death was the most painful thing I've ever experienced,” Keir said as he opened a door and led me into a magnificent room.

“For me as well,” I murmured as I peered around me.

It was a circular room so I assumed he'd brought me into one of the towers. As large as my entire house back in the Human Realm, it had polished wood floors with luxurious silk carpets laid precisely across them. The carpets were woven with intricate designs of cream and silver. A rather poor color choice for something meant to be walked on. They looked as if they'd never seen the sole of a shoe before; lustrous as a pearl.

Over one of the poorly-colored carpets, rested a massive four-poster bed made from the same stone as the castle. The posters were carved into swirls like a unicorn's horn and they curved in toward the center of the bed where they connected in a sharp, upwards point. Delicate trees grew from pots placed at the corners of the bed and their branches twined around the posters and up to the point where a mass of fluted pale green flowers hung. They bloomed all along the branches but the main collection was at that juncture and their weight caused them to droop down

toward the bed.

“Night blooming jasmine,” I whispered as I stepped forward.

“Someone told me you enjoyed the scent,” Keir said from behind me.

The puka trotted past me and climbed up into the bed. She made a few testing circles; her gigantic paws sinking into the thick silver comforter. Then she curled up, gave a contented huff, and went right to sleep.

“I wonder who that was?” I teased as I shook my head at the passed-out puka, and Keir laughed.

To the right of the bed was a dressing table of polished white wood with a tall mirror in an elaborate silver frame rising up from its back. A matching chair with a high, padded back sat in front of the table and on the table was an assortment of crystal bottles, a silver handled comb, and a silver picture frame. I wandered over to the table and picked up the frame. In it was a picture of my mother; holding a laughing baby in her arms. She was smiling like I'd never seen her smile before; the sunlight turning pieces of her auburn hair into spun gold.

“Where was this taken?” I asked Keir without removing my eyes from my mother's face.

“San Francisco.” Keir came up behind me and smiled sadly at the picture. He ran a fingertip over my mother's image. “In the park. It was the first time I met you.”

“She looks so happy,” I whispered.

“She was,” he said. “So was I. I have many pictures of her if you'd like to see them. Pictures of you as well, which she gave to me over the years.”

“Sure.” I swallowed past the lump in my throat; wishing that I could have seen this side of my mother.

I replaced the picture frame and went back to surveying the room. Off to the side of the dressing table was a large fireplace and set in front of it were two loveseats made of the same wood as the table; both upholstered in lavender velvet. On the other side of the room was a large, rectangular dining table, again in that smooth, white wood, with a few chairs gathered around it. To the right of the table and the left of the bed, was an archway which opened onto a balcony.

The room was very bright, almost as bright as it was outdoors, and when I looked up, I saw why. The walls soared above me, ending in a domed ceiling; the very top of which was transparent. The transparent piece was actually lavender, but much clearer than the stones the rest of the castle was made of, so that the sunlight was barely tinted when it passed through. I could clearly see puffy white clouds beyond it, and I immediately wondered what it would look like at night.

“Is the room all right?” Keir asked from my elbow.

“All right? It's amazing.” I swept a hand upward and laughed. “I've never had a skylight before but then I doubt there's anything remotely comparable to this on Earth.”

“Well, I would hope not.” He grinned hesitantly. “We Fey like to think that our architecture achievements supersedes that of humans in beauty and magic if not in sheer height.”

“I don't think it's a good idea to build so high,” I offered. “I don't like feeling the building I'm in sway in the breeze; it's disconcerting.”

“Yes, but when you create things that tall, there comes a point where you must either sway or break.” King Keir looked thoughtful. “Better to sway I think.”

“Better to not build that high, to begin with.” I smirked.

“Interesting.” He cocked his head at me. “So, you'd rather stay closer to earth than have to bend to the will of the wind?”

“Yes, I guess so.” I considered it. “Why is that interesting?”

“Royalty is never good at bending to the will of anyone or anything.” Keir shrugged. “So, I'm glad the castle's height meets your standards and the room, your expectations. I had it decorated in a style I found appealing, but I hope you'll make it your own soon enough.”

“It's beautiful as it is; I wouldn't change anything.” I headed out to the balcony.

I needed to see again that I was really in Fairy; it kept feeling so surreal to me. Keir followed me out onto a wide expanse of that pretty lavender stone and over to a thick railing of carved pillars. I looked out across wandering hills and forests that stretched as far as I could see. Nothing else seemed to exist in the wilderness—it was only us—and I wondered how vast the Twilight Kingdom was and just how far away the Unseelie Kingdom resided.

In *Fairy Geography* class, I'd been taught that each of the main courts had immense kingdoms with magical pathways connecting them, just as there were pathways between the Human Realm and Fairy. The kingdoms were in the same realm but on different continents so the Fey used the paths to travel between them.

The Fairy Realm itself was layered over our world, and I'd been told America was somewhere between the courts; with the Seelie Kingdom laid over Europe and the Unseelie over Asia. Of course, it's not precise, but the fairy mounds of Europe lead to the Seelie Kingdom and those in Asia lead to the Unseelie so we just made the assumption. We'd known there were fairy mounds in

America, but no human had ever been allowed through one, and we hadn't known where they connected to in Fairy. Now, I knew why; they led to the secret Twilight Kingdom.

"Why don't the Fey want humans to know about the Twilight Court?" I asked Keir.

"It was my decision," he said. "I didn't want to involve myself in human politics. I have enough here to deal with. I guess that's over now that I've revealed myself and my court to the Human Council."

"Probably." I looked back over the land. "So, Twilight is connected to America?"

"To most of the United States. If it's the nation you speak of and not the continents of North and South?" He asked, and I nodded. "Originally, there were no kingdoms or courts, just different types of fairies. Then a separation started and soon after, there was war. That was when the courts were formed and the land divided. Twilight sprang up between them—a natural barrier—as if Fairy herself was telling us to stop fighting."

"Between," I whispered.

"Yes, we rule the between of all things. There are even places considered to be in-between which lie on both Seelie and Unseelie land. Little spots where we might find sanctuary if we were to need it," he said. "It really spits off the other kingdoms."

"Spits off?" I frowned and then chuckled as I caught his meaning. "You mean it *pisses* them off?"

"Ah, yes." Keir laughed with me. "Human speech can be tricky, but your mother tried to teach me general expressions so that you might feel comfortable around me." He sighed dismally. "I guess I'm not so good at it."

"I think it will be more fun this way. Just keep trying, and

I'll keep laughing." I tried to imagine my mother teaching this fairy king human colloquialisms and just couldn't do it. Not my serious extinguisher mother. Had she been a different person entirely with him? And why had she never been so with me?

"It's a deal," he said. "Was that one correct?"

"Yes, that was right." I grinned encouragingly. "So, you were saying that the land divided?"

"Yes." Keir nodded. "If you were to view us as a map laid over your globe, the Twilight Kingdom would cover both North and South America, with exception of Alaska, which is Unseelie land."

"How about Hawaii?" I was fascinated.

"Hawaii is Unseelie as well," he added.

"And Greenland?"

"Greenland is ours." He smiled at my inquisitiveness. "Well done; you know your geography."

"Sort of." I chewed at my lip. "What about Iceland?"

"The border between Twilight and Seelie goes right between Greenland and Iceland," he explained. "Our realms are not exactly the same as far as land placement goes. We were aligned once but war changed that and so there are places that don't match up anymore. Some places which are ocean in the Human Realm are land here and vice versa. Alaska, for example, aligns with the Unseelie Sea."

"Which is why you don't cover all of the United States?" I asked.

"Yes," he agreed. "Your world is divided by regions of land but ours is cleanly cut into thirds; giving each court pieces of both land and sea. The Unseelie and Seelie get outer slices of the

sphere while Twilight gets the ring in the middle. Our kingdom extends all the way past South America, through Antarctica, and then upwards to include parts of Asia. Specifically, we have a small piece of Russia, a piece of China, then all of India, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan."

"All the best Stans, if you ask me." I smirked.

"Although, they are in a tumultuous area in the Human Realm, aren't they?" He cocked his head at me.

"They've had their fair share of problems," I agreed. "So, the Seelie Kingdom is laid over Europe, right? Or do we humans have that wrong too?"

"No, that's correct," he said. "The Seelie Kingdom covers Europe, Africa, and a small section of Asia. They have a piece of Russia and everything to the west of Iran. The Unseelie Kingdom covers the rest of Asia, Australia, Alaska and all of the islands in the Pacific Ocean."

"And these divisions happened all on their own?" I looked out at the landscape with new eyes. "The land altered itself?"

"Our land is the most magical thing about us." Keir's smile softened. "It's where our magic is born. The Fey didn't create the Fairy Realm, the realm birthed us, and it has always been connected to us; like a mother to her children. It shifted for our benefit. Although, it was hard on a lot of fairies. Fairies had to leave their homes and migrate to the kingdom of their court."

"Is that why there are regional fairies from both courts?"

"You're speaking of how there are fairies who resemble different human ethnic groups?" He lifted a brow.

"Yes, exactly. I've always wondered how there were Japanese Seelie Fey when that region is connected to the Unseelie

Court.”

“Well, first of all, they aren't Japanese, they're Fey. A distinction which is very important to them.” Keir gave me an enigmatic look. “Our realms are so closely tied that even our evolution has mirrored each other. Fairies began to resemble the humans in areas closest to their homes. Most sidhe will tell you this is the only reason why fairies resemble some human races, but the truth is that in addition to the environment, there are other contributing factors.”

“Which are?” I pressed.

“We look like humans because we bred with them,” he said. “Fairies have been consorting with humans from our very first exchange and although very few do so now, I believe the remnants of those original dalliances are still within our blood. Diluted, yes, but still there. I doubt there are any truly pure blooded fairies left. Though that is not an opinion you should repeat. It would get both of us into trouble.”

“So, what you're saying is; don't call them Japanese fairies because they really are Japanese fairies but they don't want to admit that they're Japanese fairies?” I lifted a brow.

“Yes, I think that about sums it up.” Keir laughed and then his hand went to my arm and his expression turned serious. “Seren, I know this is a lot to accept. Are there any questions about myself that I can answer for you? Anything I can do or say to help you feel more at home here?”

“I don't even know where to begin.” I sighed and realized I'd been delaying talking about us with talk of the Fey in general. “I feel a connection to you, but you're still a stranger to me. I can't just call you *Father* and forget my entire life up until this point.”

“Of course not.” He shook his head. “I've always known about you, but you've only just learned about me. So, please, tell me how I can make this easier for you. Seren, you need to know

how much you mean to me; how happy I am to finally be able to touch you and speak with you. I've waited so long for this moment; to have you home at last and experience these basic interactions that any father should have with his daughter."

"How did you meet my mother?" I headed back into the room; twisting my long hair and then tying it into a knot to get it out of the way. I've lived with long hair all of my life, but I'd never had it so long that it became an irritation, and it was going to take some time to get used to... like everything I suppose. I took a seat at the table, and Keir sat across from me.

"She came to Fairy to attend a diplomatic ball at the Unseelie Court." He smiled fondly. "I don't know how much Aideen has told you about our family, but the Unseelie King is my brother, your Uncle."

"Yes, she told me about that." I grimaced. "And I know he's probably the one who's been trying to kill me."

"Aideen sent me a report detailing an attack by two Unseelie fairies," Keir said. "I believe it was my brother's doing."

"And the Sluagh," I added, and his face went slack.

"What did you say?" Keir asked in a deathly quiet voice.

"The Sluagh were sent after me on two occasions." I watched his expression grow more and more ferocious. "Tiernan saved me both times. The last was when we went to Gentry Technologies. They showed up in the building and followed us back into Fairy. At least, I think they did. I never saw them in Fairy."

"They were at Gentry?" He frowned. "But I spoke to Dylan, and he mentioned nothing about the Sluagh."

"Is it possible that he didn't know they'd been there?" I offered. "We were separated from our team, which I assume was

Aideen's plan, or your plan rather, and so we were on a totally different floor from the others when the Sluagh attacked."

"I'll need to confirm it with Aideen." Keir took a deep breath. "It's possible they were secreted in but that would take great magic."

"Does your brother have that kind of magic?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Keir whispered.

"Then that's probably what happened," I said. "The first time they attacked us, I was in a car with Tiernan, and they lifted us up over San Francisco Bay. If it wasn't for him, I'd be in a very wet grave."

"It looks as if I owe Tiernan much more than I'd thought," he said.

"Tiernan has nothing but good things to say about you," I said softly. "I don't think he considers this a debt so much as a repayment of his debts. You've got a loyal supporter there."

"Then I'm even more blessed," he said. "How *did* our Count Shadowcall end up in your company?"

"He was sent to kill Aideen," I explained. "Just as I had been."

"Yes, you were meant to pursue her, but we never sent the Wild Hunt. That must have been my brother's doing as well."

"When Tiernan heard her story, he got suspicious and notified the European Fairy Council," I continued, and Keir's eyes widened. "They told him to investigate further, so he went to San Francisco and joined the Extinguisher investigation."

"Ah, yes." Keir laughed. "Tiernan can be relentless when he decides to pursue something."

“Yes, I've noticed.” I rolled my eyes.

“Has he been pursuing anything else I should know about?” Keir asked with a grin.

“Perhaps.” I smiled back.

“You could do a lot worse than that one,” Keir said. “Tiernan is a strong fairy; in more ways than the physical. He's never broken a vow to me, and I've never seen him take advantage of those who are weaker than him. Even the pixies like him, and there are very few who can claim that honor.”

“Yes, but I don't want to talk about Tiernan.” I got us back on track. “I want to know how you seduced my mom away from my dad.”

“Oh.” Keir's face fell. “Yes, I guess you could see it as such. Although, we never meant to hurt Ewan. Truly, he had the better end of the arrangement. He got to live with you and your mother while I waited here and did my best to keep you both safe.”

“Mom loved my Dad.” I shook my head. “I don't understand how she could betray him.”

“We met at the Ball,” Keir started the story again. “Ewan had been unable to attend so she had come alone. She was magnificent; a fiery-haired woman with emerald eyes and an aura which blazed around her even brighter than her hair. I was pulled to her flame like a moth, and I admit that I didn't care that she was already wed to another. I had to have her.”

“And she just allowed that to happen?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Hardly.” He laughed. “Oh, no; she fought me at every turn and when she left that night, it was without me. I am not a man to be defeated so easily, though, and I bribed her driver to feign an accident so I could come to her rescue. The fairy mound she was

using was the one connected to Japan and it was far from the Unseelie Court. I thought it was the perfect opportunity."

"And she didn't see through that ruse?"

"I'm sure she did." Keir shrugged. "But what could she do? She was stranded in the middle of a fairy forest with only me there to offer assistance. It was late by then, and I, of course, insisted that she stay the night at my castle, which was much closer than the Unseelie one."

"So, Tiernan isn't the only fairy who's relentless in his pursuits," I huffed.

"Yes, I was a bit of a scoundrel in that instance," he admitted. "Still, your mother fended off my advances with cool expertise and the next morning, I saw her home safely."

"So how did you...?"

"Win her?" He asked, and I nodded. "I stalked her like a wolf. I chased her all over the Human Realm until she finally gave in and admitted that she was just as in love with me as I was with her."

"Tiernan told me how fairy magic can manipulate your desires," I said.

"Yes." Keir gave a sort of side-nod. "I knew we were meant to be together by the strength of my attraction for her. I never saw it as a manipulation, as I think most fairies do not. It's guidance from our mother. Danu, Nature, whatever you wish to call her; she's nurturing as most mothers are, and she loves us. She wants us to be happy and sometimes we need to be guided toward that happiness."

"Danu," I whispered. "I keep hearing her name. Does that mean it's true that the Fey are the Tuatha de Danaan, Children of Danu?"

“Yes and no,” Keir said. “The original title was Tuatha *d'Anu* and it refers to a people who worshiped the god Anu. They were humans; a tribe that spread across the world and influenced several cultures. Even in Japan, there is still a shamanic tribe called the Ainu whose early form of writing is Gaelic Ogham.”

“The Scythians?” I blinked as it all started to weave together in my mind.“Like there is Scythian Gaelic?”

“Yes.” Keir smiled broader. “The red-haired, green-eyed dragon lords whose connection to Anu gave them great magical power. We were confused with them so often that we finally gave in and allowed the name to stick, but we changed *d'Anu* to *de Danaan.* The new title was accurate, so yes; we are the Tuatha de Danaan.”

“So, there is a god called Anu and a goddess Danu?” I cocked my head at him. “They're rather similar names.”

“Because they are twin gods,” he said. “Split apart to rule the joined realms. Anu was given dominion over the Human Realm and Danu over Fairy. Humans, with their shorter lifespans, tend to change more than us Fey and their gods change with them. Anu has had several incarnations; you may know him as Christ or Allah. Danu, however, has always remained the same for us. She has ever been here and has never led us astray.”

“Tiernan said that going against Nature's urging could result in monsters,” I whispered.

“Yes,” Keir confirmed. “As I've said, she guides us. The Sluagh are cursed and, sadly, it's not their fault but that of their parents. They are the product of perversions; that which happens when we ignore Danu. I, like other parents who produced most of my court, gave in to Danu's urging and found my happiness. I loved your mother completely. More than anything; more than my family, more than the evening star, more than my very life. I would have brought her here to live, but she became pregnant and my

spies started to alert me to my brother's intentions."

"So, you told her to stay with her husband?" I asked in amazement.

"It was the safest place for her." A deep sadness filled his eyes as he spoke, "And the safest place for you."

"Until someone sent a bunch of pukas to kill her," I said in a low voice as I glanced over at the puka sleeping soundly in my bed. It was a good thing the bed was massive because otherwise, she would have taken up the whole mattress.

"Yes, until then," he said grimly. "I will protect you now, Seren. I and that one there." He nodded toward the puka. "It's rather fitting that one of your new guardians is a puka. Maybe this one can atone for the unknowing sins of her kin."

"Maybe." I sighed.

"You'll have to name her now," Keir said thoughtfully. "A claimed beast needs a name to fully bond with its master or mistress."

"Why bother?" I asked with grim humor. "I may not live to call her by it."

"Seren"—Keir reached across the table to take my hand —"I promise you; you'll be safe here."

"You can't promise that," I said and pulled my hand out of his grip. "So, it's a good thing I'm an extinguisher, and I can take care of myself."

Chapter Twenty-One

Keir left me alone so I could bathe and change into something for dinner... after he pointed out where the bathroom and the closet were. They were behind two adjacent doors in my room. One led to a ridiculously luxurious bathroom and the other to a ridiculously elaborate closet. I fit right in since my being there was pretty damn ridiculous too. What would Abby say if she could see me? Would she laugh or cry? Or would she beg me for a bath in the ginormous tub?

I smiled at the thought and went into the bathroom through the door beside the fireplace. Even the door was beautiful; cream colored wood adorned with silver curlicues as if the Fey couldn't stand the thought of even one thing being plain. I shook my head at the door as I closed it behind me. Abby would probably be living this up; already immersed to her chin in fairy bubble bath or sifting through the rows of stunning gowns hanging in the closet. Or perhaps trying on all the shoes. Abby had a love for shoes that bordered on being a fetish. I looked down at my mud covered boots and sighed. She would fit in here better than I.

I sat down on a dainty silver stool and began to undo my boot laces. Would this even help? Could I become a new person simply by shedding my old clothes? Did I even want to become a new person? Or maybe I should be asking if I had a choice in the matter. I guess I could just leave. I could turn my nose up at Keir's offer of love and protection, stumble my way back through the forest and into the Human Realm, and return to being Ewan's daughter, Extinguisher Seren Sloane. I could marry some extinguisher meat-head, have lots of extinguisher babies, and hope the Sluagh didn't try to kill me again. And that was all on the off chance that the Human Council would let me continue being an

extinguisher.

Yeah, not much of a choice.

I slid out of the boots; dried mud falling like soiled snowflakes all over the pristine white floor. Bomph; the hollow sound startled me, and I just stared at my iron dagger where it had landed on the stone floor. How had I totally forgotten about the dagger in my boot? I picked it up and laid it carefully on the counter next to a stack of white, linen towels. Then I unstrapped my thigh sheath and laid my short-sword down beside it.

I placed my hands over the weapons—looking from their sober strength to the cheerful opulence around me—and wondered if I'd ever wield them again. Was this a turning point? The place where I stopped being a soldier and started becoming a princess? I took a shaky breath and lifted my face to the reflection in the mirror hanging before me. Who was this woman? Who did those strange eyes belong to? Who owned that striped hair? She wore my clothes and my face, but I had a feeling that I would soon be lost to her. That even those pieces of me which I still recognized would fall under her spell and alter with her whims.

“You're being an idiot,” I accused my reflection. “You can change your clothes and change your body but that doesn't change who you are.”

I nodded curtly; making a pact with myself to remember this moment. Not as a turning point but as a touching stone; a place I could return to and remember that I was not this body. The true me wasn't altered so easily. I unsheathed my sword with a decisive swish and flicked my wrist to twist it into a familiar arch. The movement was comforting; empowering. I swung it again and smiled at the dark metal before I replaced it in its sheath. I could put these items away, hide them from sight, but they would remain with me. The feel of a hilt in my hand would always be natural; no matter how long I went without it.

Then I recalled that my weapons weren't the only anti-fey items I had on me, and I dug my hand into my pockets to pull out the charms. A withered four leaf clover, a little plastic bag of oatmeal, a lump of dried St. John's wort, and a little cross made of rowan wood. I piled them next to the iron blades and stared down at them thoughtfully. What did I do with them now? Should I keep them or throw them in the fireplace? It probably went against some kind of fairy etiquette to carry them around. I sighed and stared down the long counter; putting off the decision.

There were two gold sinks set in the alabaster counter like sacred vessels on an altar. Beside each of them was a small gold dish with an offering of handmade soap set within. Above each sink was an oval mirror in a gold frame; reflective eyes staring out of violet walls. Little gold stars were painted over the walls; gleaming in the light of a chandelier above. I spared them a glance as I padded across the cool stone barefooted; down the length of the rectangular room to where it ended in a floor-to-ceiling window. The window curved outward; panes of glass set into gold frames so that a grid was formed over the amazing view of the Twilight Forest.

Set into the curve of the window was a bench. Cloud-like cushions on top and spindly gold legs beneath. It looked too fragile to sit on and too clean for my dirty self. It didn't matter, I wasn't there to sit and enjoy the view, I just wanted to close the curtains so I didn't have to worry about any peeping pixies.

As I reached for the curtains, the sun set and the sky started to take on a lavender hue. Magic rushed through my limbs, and I fell forward onto that pristine bench; staining it horribly. My heart began to pound faster—I could hear my blood pulsing through it—and with it, my magic. I pushed myself upright and stared down at my extended hands. Lavender light—a perfect match to the sky outside—sparkled around my fingertips.

“What do I do with this?” I held up my hands and watched as the light began to condense. It drifted down to my feet as I

began to levitate; forming little clouds beneath me. “No, no, no!” I forced myself back down and started waving wildly at the clouds; trying to disperse them as if they were simply smoke. “Go away; I don't know what you can do yet. Go away!”

The clouds burst apart with a tinkling of tiny bells, and I stood up; heaving a sigh of relief. Then I realized that I was probably going to have to deal with this everyday; twice a day if it happened at dawn too. So far, I'd slept through dawn so I didn't know if I turned into a fairy fog machine right before the sun rose. Wonderful. I guess I should look on the bright side... literally. If I ever wanted to check out a rave, I'd probably be a big hit. Now, I just needed to learn how to do those silly hand moves. Or is it called hand-dancing? Hand-jiving? Handing? Fingering? Fisting? Whoa, that went bad really fast. It was definitely not the last two.

I shook my head at my own rambling thoughts and pulled the long, amethyst, silk curtains closed over the darkening view. All raving jokes aside, I needed to get a handle on my magic. I stretched my hands—trying to flex out the remnants of energy I could feel tingling in my fingers—then went back past the little toilet nook and over to the amazing bathtub.

It was set into the floor in the shape of a star because fairies evidently liked their themes. Five points spanned out from a deep, round center; all of it lined in shining, white stone that went halfway up the points. There the stone stopped—sloping down toward the center of the tub—and the rest of the points were triangular panels of gold. Within each of these gold points was a votive candle set down into a niche. The candles were already lit; warming the gold and making the bath look like some kind of Pagan ritual. I stood at the star's base; in between the two bottom points which had steps leading down their slopes. The top point, directly across from me, had a gold faucet rising up right in front of its candle in a graceful arch and knobs set into the gold panel to either side of it.

The two points bracketing this top one had stone ledges set

into them instead of stairs. These points had cream colored cushions laid across the space before their candles so I could sit back on a ledge and rest my head. In a semi-circle around the three top points was a low, gold shelf boasting large bottles of colorful bath products (I assumed) and around the outside of this shelf, purple silk curtains draped down from the ceiling for no apparent reason other than adornment.

I stripped—casting aside the black combat clothing into a careless pile—and then stepped down through one of the points and into the deep center of the tub. A turn of the knobs and water started pouring from the tap. Excellent, now all I had to do was figure out which liquid went on my hair and which on my body. It probably didn't even matter.

As the tub filled, I smelled each of the concoctions set out on the ledges and finally picked what I thought was a shampoo, a conditioner, and a body wash. I set to work scrubbing myself while the tub was only half full which worked out well. When the water level was higher, I dropped my head back into the water to wet my hair and shampoo it. When I was done scrubbing and then soaking myself (I couldn't resist a long soak, the silly star tub was so damn comfortable), I climbed out and dried off.

On my way out of the bathroom, I scooped up the anti-fey charms. I hesitated between the fireplace and the dressing table and at the last moment, turned toward the dresser. I opened one of the little drawers that ran down each side and threw the charms in. Best not to risk burning them; who knew what that would do in Fairy.

When I padded across the room and into the closet—which was its own room—the puka woke up and followed me. She sat patiently on the thick rug and watched as I rifled through drawers and pushed golden hanger after golden hanger aside to frown at amazing gowns which I couldn't even begin to understand the mechanics of. I have three words for you; too many straps.

After fifteen minutes, all I had on was a pair of white silk panties and a lacy, white bra. At least, I think it was a bra; it was in the shape of a small vest with triangles of lace which fastened together in the front with gold hooks. After I got it on, the lace tightened like magical spandex; lifting my breasts and making them look even larger than they were.

“Great, now everything I put on will look obscene,” I huffed and sat on a little bench in the center of the large room.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the full-length, three-sided mirror at the end of the room and sighed deeper. I looked like a stripper. Pushed up cleavage, tiny panty, and that damn purple stripe in my damp hair. I even had a stripper name; Twilight Princess. All I needed was a pole. I searched the room thoughtfully but there were no vertical poles to be found, all of them were horizontal.

One of the horizontal poles was directly in front of me and held a whole lot of gowns. Beneath the gowns were two shelves of shoes; some were sturdy boots but most were delicate things made of soft leather with spindly heels and sparkly bits all over them as if some rabid jeweler had got a hold of them. I rolled my eyes. At least I knew where Aideen got her shoe inspiration from.

Further down, there were drawers set into the walls and above those were glass cabinets filled with amazing pieces of jewelry set out on display as if this were a museum. There were even little spotlights above them... and how did the Fey power all of those lights anyway? I looked around again; realizing there weren't even light switches. Must be some kind of motion sensor... or magic... or magic motion sensors. I shrugged. Who was I to question it? I moved stuff around with my mind.

On the other wall were more drawers and two lengths of gold rods; one set a few feet above the other. The top one was appropriately hung with assorted tops while the bottom was full of bottoms. Very efficient, but I had no idea what to pair with what.

My usual outfit consisted of jeans and a T-shirt. If I wanted to get creative, I wore a T-shirt with a funny saying written across it. I could really use one of those now. How great would it be to walk into a fairy feast wearing a T-shirt which read: *Totally Un-Fey-zed*, perhaps with a picture of Tinkerbell meditating?

"Maybe we should address the issue of your name first," I said to the puka, and she perked up to look at me intensely. "You want a name, huh? I guess I would too. I'd hate for people to just call me *Hey You* or *Girl*. Hmm, let's see. How about Shadow?"

The puka lowered her head to the floor and whined.

"Yeah, that's obvious and too similar to Tiernan's name." I rolled my eyes. "He has a big enough ego as it is; I wouldn't want him to think I like him or something." The puka lifted a brow—I swear she did—and stared hard at me. "What the hell, dog? You don't know how complicated my feelings are right now. I do not need to add a relationship with some hot fairy who thinks he's my hot fey guardian. No matter how hot he is. I said *hot* too many times, didn't I?"

The puka gave a big huff, so heavy that she moved some of the long, silky fur around her neck.

"So, anyway." I grimaced at her. "Back to your name. I could call you... Alice. I like *Alice in Wonderland;* my Mom used to read... wait, do you think it's inappropriate to name you after my mother? Is that weird?"

The puka perked up again.

"The funny thing is her name was Catriona, so we could shorten it and call you Cat." I giggled, and the puka yipped happily. "That's funny, isn't it? A dog named Cat? What do you say? You want to be called Catriona after my Mom?"

Another yip, and I found myself hugging her; a bittersweet shiver running through my heart. Cat nestled her face against mine,

her soft fur tickling my nose, and I leaned into the solid weight of her. She was a muscular animal and her wide jaws held a set of impressive teeth. Keir was right; Cat could probably do a damn fine job of protecting me.

A knock interrupted our hug so I stood up and frantically searched the room for some kind of robe to throw on. Finally, I found a long, blue, silk robe and swung it on as I raced to the bedroom door. I had just fastened it when I pulled the door open to find a little woman, standing maybe four feet high, with nut brown skin, bright gold hair, and gentle eyes the color of hot chocolate. Those eyes were almost completely round and took up half of her face.

“Your Highness.” She bobbed a curtsy. “I'm Mairte. I've been sent to help you dress.”

“Oh, thank the baby Jesus!” I cried and grabbed her around her shoulders so I could yank her into the room. She stared at me with eyes gone even wider as I babbled. “I'm totally lost here. There are so many pieces of clothing that I have no idea what to do with.”

“I will gladly help you, Princess.” She smiled and closed the door behind her. “Let's just take a look at what the King has chosen for you.”

“The King picked all of my clothes?” I stopped and gaped at her.

“Oh, yes.” Mairte nodded as she went past me into the closet, which I guess wasn't really a closet but a dressing room. “His Majesty has been eagerly anticipating your arrival since the day of your birth. When you reached womanhood, he had this room prepared for you and has slowly been filling it with things he's personally chosen.”

“That's... that's... wow.” I blinked as I thought about Keir picking out every piece of clothing. If he hadn't been my father, I

would have called him a crazy stalker.

“Yes, His Majesty loves you very much,” Mairte said as she flicked her hand at the gowns before her. They began to move as if someone were sifting through them. “We're all so excited to see him happy at last.”

“Yes, happy.” I frowned; wondering if I'd live long enough to keep him that way.

“Oh, this is lovely.” She crooked her finger and a gold hanger lifted off the closet rod and slid forward to reveal a shimmering silver dress. It twirled in the air before her. “It will enhance your eyes. Shall we try it?”

“Um, okay.” I took off the robe, and her eyes widened again.

“Oh, my; you will have the men falling at your feet.” She giggled when I self-consciously covered my cleavage with my hands. “No, don't be embarrassed. We Fey are never ashamed of our bodies and yours is especially something to be proud of.”

“Excuse me?” I blinked at her. “I've seen the women here. They're like super models; gorgeous and thin... and tall. Sheesh, I can't compete with that.”

“You're talking about the sidhe women,” she said with a little smirk. “All of us are not so tall or thin.” Mairte ran a hand over her plump figure.

“Right,” I stammered, “I didn't mean to be insulting.”

“Oh, not at all.” She laughed. “You'll find that here in Fairy, we have many types of beauty, and everyone has their preference. The sidhe do tend to be statuesque but that is all these sidhe men get among their own.” She winked at me. “Steak is delicious but feed it to a man at every meal, and he will long for something of a different flavor. Unfortunately, the sidhe scorn

relations with lesser fey so they're unable to satisfy those hungers."

"Damn snobs," I huffed, and she chuckled.

"They can't help it; it's been bred into them." Mairte shrugged. "But you, my Princess, are a sidhe woman with very un-sidhe curves. The fairy men will love that; be they sidhe or not. Why do you think they take human lovers all the time?" She shook her head and laughed. "Because no fairy woman looks like this." She waved a hand at my body. "Now, forget this dress." She put the silver gown back. "We need something to show those off."

"Do you think that's wise?" I watched her with concern. "I don't want to look slutty the first time I meet the Twilight Court."

"Your Highness"—she laughed—"we don't use that term here. Sexuality is natural and if a fairy chooses to indulge in pleasure, that's his or her concern. We are sensual beings and all fairy women dress to accentuate their best features. Trust me; if the sidhe women had those"—she waved her little fingers at my cleavage—"fairy fashion would be for much lower necklines."

"All right, I guess you'd know better than I." I sighed and went to sit on the bench again.

Cat sat beside me, and we watched Mairte together as dress after dress was sent magically floating through the air, directed by her adorably chubby little fingers, to be piled on the bench beside me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A knock came at my door just twenty minutes after Mairte left. I was still sitting in front of the dressing table; staring at my reflection in disbelief with Cat seated on the floor beside me. I got up in a daze; looking once more at the elegant fall of fat curls trailing over my left shoulder, arranged to show off the purple streak there. Mairte had pinned a diamond star over the amethyst hair to highlight it even further.

She'd dusted silver powder on my skin, giving me an ethereal glow, and outlined my eyes in black kohl so they looked enormous. My lips were stained red and my cheeks blushed pink but it was the rest of me that struck me silent.

The dress she'd finally decided on was dusky lavender; which she said would be a nice tribute to my lineage as well as an enhancement to my coloring. It had a curving neckline that barely skimmed the edges of my shoulders before flowing back into a shimmering cape which cascaded to the floor. My arms were bare although the cape skimmed the top of them and the bodice fit tightly to my waist; emphasizing the curve of my hips. From my waist, several layers of thin silk streamed down and swirled with every step I took.

I shook my head at my unbelievable reflection and went to open the door. King Keir stood there looking amazing in a royal-purple silk tunic with silver stars embroidered along the collar and midnight leather pants beneath that. He had a sword—even more beautiful and elaborate than the one he'd worn earlier—hung on his hip and was wearing a thick, silver necklace set with amethysts. His long hair was braided back cleanly—showing off the sleek lines of his face—and he was wearing a silver crown set with a

huge amethyst in its center.

“Sweet goddess,” he whispered. “You look wonderful, Seren.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and slid out of the room. Cat followed closely behind me, and I closed the door after her.

“Your mother would be so happy to see you here like this.” Keir smiled sadly.

“I'd be happy to see her too,” I whispered.

Keir nodded in commiseration as he led me down the hallway and back to the main stairs.

“Have you decided on a name for your puka.” He angled his head toward Cat.

“Actually, I named her after Mom.” I gave a little grin.

“What?” He looked shocked.

“I'm calling her Cat.” I grinned wider.

“You've named a puka, *Cat*?” He started to chuckle.

“Yep.” I nodded, and Cat gave a yip. “She likes it.”

“I'm sure your mother would have as well.” Keir smiled fondly at me.

“How's this going to go?” I changed the subject. “Is there anything I need to know before we go down there?”

“You'll be sitting at the high table with me, of course,” he said. “I've had Lady Aideen and Count Tiernan invited to sit with us. I thought it might make you more comfortable, but if you'd prefer it to be just us, that would be fine.”

“No, I'm happy to have them there,” I said and

concentrated on walking in the bejeweled heels Mairte had insisted I wear.

“Excellent.” Keir led me down the main stairs and toward a door on our right.

“Who are they?” I waved a hand back toward the statues at the foot of the stairs.

“My parents,” he said. “Your grandparents. King Dhoire Thorn of the Unseelie and Queen Iseabal Bloodburn of the Seelie.”

“Wait.” I blinked as I processed it. “Were you the first royal child of mixed heritage?”

“Yes, I'm the first Twilight King, and you are our first Princess,” he said serenely.

“So, Uisdean is your half-brother,” I worked it through.

“Yes.” Keir stopped before the door and turned to speak to me, “I have three half-brothers and a half-sister. My sister and two of my brothers are Unseelie while the last brother is Seelie. My father and his queen were killed during one of the fey wars but my mother still rules the Seelie Court with her husband.”

“She had a child with another man while she was married?” My eyes went wide.

“It was the call of Danu.” He shrugged. “Her husband could not fault her for it, especially since the child became a king.”

“Wow, that's an understanding man,” I huffed.

“Because he's also a fairy.” Keir smiled. “We have different views on such things.”

“Do you have open marriages?”

“Not exactly. We are children of nature and as such, we

follow our instincts. If you love your wife, you'll trust her instincts," he said.

"Whose name did you take?" I decided to get off the subject of marital indiscretions.

"Both." He looked at me as if it were obvious. "Our family name was created for me, and you will be the first I'll share it with. Bloodthorn; a combination of both Seelie and Unseelie."

"Oh, right." I hadn't even thought of taking Keir's name, much less being only the second person to have it. I tried to process it while he opened the large, intricately carved doors and led me into a massive dining room.

We strolled down a center aisle, between two lengths of tables set with dark purple tablecloths, stunning silver candelabras, huge vases overflowing with flowers, and sparkling crystal glasses. Above us, the air was populated with pixies—little winged fairies like the ones we'd met on the way to the castle—and even some winged sidhe. They hovered lower as we approached; the sidhe gracefully landing so they could bow as we passed.

The walls were covered in a tapestry of flowering vines which wove its way up to trail across the ceiling. The scent of those multicolored blooms wafted over to me along with that of ripe fruit and exotic perfume. Leaves rustled and pixies peered out of the foliage at me, along with other tiny creatures I didn't recognize. Large, glowing, crystal stars hung from the ceiling at varying heights; shining light down over the court like captured constellations.

The fairies stared at me as we passed, even as they bowed, and some of the looks I got were not in the least bit welcoming. I stumbled a little under one particularly nasty sneer, but Keir gracefully supported me so I didn't fall; giving no sign that anything had happened.

My heartbeat sped in response to the unexpected threat and

my limbs filled with nervous energy. I hadn't even considered that the fairies in my own court might be a part of the plot to kill me, but those icy, insolent looks had been a revelation. I hadn't expected to be warmly received by all of the Fey, but I'd thought myself safe behind the warded walls of the Twilight Castle. Now, I knew better. I would never be safe—not in Fairy or the Human Realm—and I had to start acting accordingly.

I began to look over the Twilight Fey with the calculating eyes of an extinguisher; noting those who displayed obvious disdain as well as those who were more subtle in their dislike. The subtle ones were far more dangerous, and those were the fairies I paid particular attention to. I slid into the threat assessment and survival modes I'd been trained to follow; instantly determining where the exits were, what or who would be the most flammable, what objects would make the best weapons, and who were the most lethal fighters in the room. I examined every possible way to defend myself using both my psychic and physical abilities, and I did it all within moments.

Once I had a *feel* for the room, I returned to gawking. There were so many types of fairies there, a lot of whom I didn't recognize right away, and I found myself fascinated by the diversity, despite the possibility of an attack. Then I realized that what I was seeing were combinations of Seelie and Unseelie fairies. There were women with flower petals for hair and horse-like legs. Possibly children of anthousai, the Greek flower nymphs, and hedley-kow, who were horse-shifters. I also saw squat, hairy fairies, maybe two feet tall with long rat tails, who must have been a blend of the fir darrig, also known as rat boys, and duergars, who are a type of dwarf.

A woman with five, fluffy tails hanging out of a discreet hole in her dress, pondered me with fiery snake eyes which, strangely enough, seemed kind. She was obviously part kitsune, a Japanese fox shifter, and a powerful one judging from the number of her tails, but I wasn't sure if her other half was naga, a Hindu

snake shifter, or djinn, an Arab fire fairy. The djinn had three classes, one of which resembled either snakes or dogs so those eyes could be a gift from either race. Then there were brownies like Mairte, but I noticed that some of them had hag features or even kelpie hair. There were so many combinations of fairy, from so many different cultures, that it was mind-boggling.

My eyes darted over tufted ears and animal stares, jewel-toned hair and multi-colored skin, scales and fur, living stone and twitching leaves. A huge, long-haired dog startled me but then I realized that it wasn't an unseelie puka but a bargest, as evidenced by the little horns curving back behind his ears. Everything else about it resembled a puka; from its fiery eyes to its massive size. Although, the bargest was just a touch bigger. They were known to be mild-tempered creatures who often saved the lives of humans. They especially liked the ladies and, unlike the pukas, they could shift into human form to woo said ladies. I smiled as the bargest I'd been watching bowed his head and gave a low bark. Cat barked back happily.

We finally made our way through the throng and walked up three short steps onto a dais where the high table was placed horizontally. It was set like the other tables but this one had two thrones behind it and then two more modest chairs; one to either side of the thrones. Behind those thrones, hanging on the vine-covered wall, was a banner with a device embroidered onto it. The shield outline was filled with a grayish lavender color, like the stones of the castle, and over that lavender field, directly in the center of the shield, was a large, silver star. The symbol of the Twilight Court appeared to be a star, which explained all the star decor... and my name evidently. Talk about being obsessive.

Keir led me to the thrones and seated me on his left. Cat sat calmly on the floor between us; as if she'd been doing so her entire life. After we sat, the rest of the room returned to their socializing and the murmur of voices rose around us to a comfortable din. Tiernan strode up onto the dais and took the seat on my left as

Aideen took the one next to Keir. Tiernan gave me a wicked smile as he sat and pointedly looked me over.

“I hardly recognize you,” he whispered; his eyes trailing down to my shameful display of cleavage.

“I hardly recognize myself... or these fairies,” I whispered back as I hid my smile. Maybe Mairte was right; if you got it, flaunt it. “There are so many combinations that it's hard for me to figure out who is what.”

“There are a few who are purely twilight; their parents' blood combined in a way that produced a new race with unique features.” Tiernan waved a hand over to a woman with large, slanted, chartreuse eyes and thick, ebony hair. “The cat-sidhe were born in that manner and so were the bargests and the buguls.” He indicated the large shaggy dog I'd seen earlier and then an ugly little man who I knew from my lessons to be a very kind-hearted fairy. “The rest, though, are blends which have left clear markings of both parents.” He nodded to a man with golden hair like spun metal and super pale skin. The fairy smiled and nodded back as Tiernan explained, “Seelie hair and unseelie skin.”

“The Seelie don't have pale skin?” I lifted a brow at his own fair complexion.

“Not *that* pale.” Tiernan nudged his nose in the man's direction again. “That's moonlight skin; fairest of the fair.”

“Like Snow White?” I laughed, but I did see the difference. Tiernan's skin was human pale while the Twilight fairy had skin that was pure white.

“Please don't ever call Iain that.” He shook his head. “He will not take kindly to your teasing, and he's one of the few fairies I consider to be a friend.”

“Okay.” I held up my hands in surrender. “I won't call your friend Snow White.”

“Thank you.”

“How about Shaun White?” I giggled.

“Shaun...” Tiernan frowned. “Isn't he a human athlete?”

“A snowboarder, actually,” I said. “Kind of a funny coincidence that his name is so close to Snow White.”

“It's not close to Snow White, it's another name entirely.” Tiernan rolled his eyes. “A name which should only be used in reference to him, *not* Iain.”

“It's funny,” I protested.

“It's not,” Tiernan declared with finality. “You've drawn a connection where there is none.”

Then trumpets sounded, cutting off my response, and fairies began to bring food out to us on large, silver carts. There was quite a bit of it and it all looked delicious. Steaming platters were set on our table with great panache. I wasn't sure what it all was but it smelled good enough that I didn't care. Then Tiernan began to dish things out onto my plate, and I raised a brow at him. I glanced to my right and saw Keir doing the same thing for Aideen.

“And now I'm in the Middle Ages,” I said and sat back as I gestured to the pitcher of wine and brought it forward to fill my glass; using apportation so I didn't get in his way.

“Chivalry is important to us.” Tiernan grinned at me but his eyes strayed to my breasts.

“Try saying that again to my face,” I said and then laughed.

“Goddess, but I don't know if I can.” Tiernan laid the serving spoon down and laughed at himself. “Did you choose that dress yourself?”

“No, Mairte helped me pick it,” I admitted. “She said that fairy women showed off their assets and, evidently, these are mine.”

“That they are,” he agreed; still keeping his gaze averted.

“You're not going to offend me by looking.” I nudged his shoulder with mine. “I was just teasing you.”

“Oh, thank Danu.” Tiernan sighed and immediately looked back at my display of flesh. “They are magnificent. I had no idea how I was going to get through this meal without staring again.”

“Are you speaking of my daughter's breasts?” Keir leaned over into our conversation, and Tiernan paled... almost as white as his friend Iain, AKA Not Snow White.

“It would be insulting if he didn't notice.” I gave Keir a wink.

“Very true.” Keir glanced down at my cleavage and shook his head. “Even I am having trouble with it and it has nothing to do with attraction, I assure you.”

“Well, I'd hope not.” I gave him a horrified look.

“Fairies think differently about things like incest.” Tiernan gave me a sly look.

“Shut up!” I transferred my horrified look to him.

“My Lord Shadowcall is teasing you.” Keir gave Tiernan an affectionately chiding look before clarifying. “There is no censure for cousins marrying, but a father would never feel such things for his daughter.”

“At least, not normally,” Tiernan said cryptically, and I felt my eyes widen again. “Don't act as if that doesn't happen with humans.”

“Yeah, okay.” My face fell into a grimace. “Gross, but yes, you're right.”

“Good, we can move on from discussing my daughter's breasts now.” Keir made an aggrieved expression, and I saw myself in it.

I couldn't help smiling. Maybe I'd inherited something more than his eyes and a stripe of hair.

“*You* can move on.” Tiernan waved a hand out to the rest of the court. “But I have a feeling it's going to be the topic of a lot of conversations tonight.”

I looked up and, sure enough, several gazes seemed to be fastened on my cleavage. Okay, so this might be a bit more attention than I'd bargained for. My hand went to cover my decolletage, but Tiernan grabbed my wrist before I did.

“Do not ever appear uncomfortable,” he advised in a low voice. “No matter what happens, you're a princess, and a fairy princess is always confident. You should be able to stand here naked and feel no shame. To do anything else would be an insult to your people. They count on you to lead them without any sign of weakness.”

“Wait a second.” I glanced at Keir. “I don't know how to lead people, much less fairy people.”

“You will learn,” Keir said gently. “For now, my Lord Tiernan has given you good advice. Look as if you are born to be here until you feel it for yourself.”

“Fake it till I make it?” I smirked at Keir.

Cat huffed and slid her head onto my lap. She had to lower her body to do so since her head was level with my shoulder, but she didn't seem to mind. She just sort of tucked herself partially beneath my chair.

“Yes.” Keir chuckled; casting a quick, delighted glance at Cat. “That's perfect, I like it. But know this, Seren, you are my daughter, and you have more right to be here than any of them. This is *your* home, the only one which has ever truly been yours. Every stone, every dish, every *flower* belongs to you. They are simply your guests, and they remain here only at your pleasure. If someone or something offends you, you have the authority to cast it out.”

“Thank you,” I whispered and sat a little straighter.

His words had rung a chord within me. Even when my mother was alive, the houses we'd lived in had never truly felt like homes. Everything had felt transitory, as if it could all disappear by morning, and after she died, it all did. Dad and I lived out of boxes for our first year in Hawaii and even after I'd unpacked, I'd felt that it wasn't where I belonged so why should I get comfortable?

There, in that amazing castle, I could feel the weight of permanence. Maybe I wasn't a part of that permanence just yet, but I could feel the age of the place and if I did find a way to make it my home, it would be a lasting one. It would take root in me and go with me everywhere. I would carry it inside me. Every stone and every flower, just as he'd said.

I frowned and thought of my dad. My human dad. No, I couldn't get attached to this place because I still needed to return to him. I couldn't abandon him, not even for this. Whether or not he was my father by blood, Ewan had raised me, and I loved him. He would always be my father and no amount of fairy castles could change that.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Princess Seren,” a sidhe man slid between me and my escape route. He was tall and thin, very prim looking, with his long corn husk hair pulled back in a braid. I tried to smile at him but my face was getting tired of smiling and my gaze drifted past him to the safety of the high table.

As soon as the dancing had begun, the offers of partners had started arriving. Man after man had approached the high table and asked to dance with me with varying degrees of poetic pleasantry. The first few had been flattering but after the twentieth, it had simply become exhausting and this newest prospect didn't even look as if he was worth the weariness.

“I've already claimed the next dance with the Princess,” a gruff voice interrupted before the sidhe could finish his sonnet-like spiel.

“Conri, I didn't see you ask,” the sidhe stiffened.

“Oh, but I did, didn't I, Your Highness?” This new voice rolled over me like mist at midnight—a thick, mysterious heaviness—and it fit the man perfectly.

Conri was built like a bull; corded muscles creating distinctive shadows in his green tunic and showing clearly through his fitted leather pants. Linebacker massive and yet there was a sleekness to him that made him appear almost elegant. I looked up into a strikingly masculine face with a wide jaw, thick nose, and sharply angled cheeks. His lips were surprisingly sensuous amid all the rough features; almost as full as a woman's. Pitch-black hair hung in tousled disarray, barely reaching his shoulders, and at his temples a pair of small black horns curved back, discretely

sweeping behind his ears to end just beneath his earlobes. Savage elegance, that's what he was.

“Yes,” I gave a breathless answer, “he did.”

“Shall we?” Conri bowed and held a hand up to me.

I took it as the sidhe sputtered indignantly behind me, and Conri smiled wickedly as he led me back to the open bit of stone floor just in front of the high table. A quick movement of his wrist, and I was pressed up against him; staring up into eyes of fire. I'd seen those eyes before... and those horns actually.

“You're the bargest who barked at me, aren't you?” I asked him, and he smiled wider.

“You noticed; how sweet.” Conri swung me out and then pulled me back in, even closer this time.

“It was the horns that gave you away.” I admired the sleek black curves that were partially hidden by his hair.

“Do you like men with horns?” He asked with a devilish smile; making me laugh out loud.

“Are you trying to get me to call you horny?” I asked after my laughter died away.

“No,” he whispered as he leaned closer. “I'm trying to get you to say that you like me horny.”

“You know”—I laughed again—“I was wondering when I'd meet a fairy playa, but I'd thought it was going to be a gancanagh.”

“Too obvious,” he scoffed, “seduction is their job.”

“So what? They don't like to do it in their free time?” I lifted a brow.

“They do, it's just too obvious,” he repeated. “You can see them coming a mile away. Not literally, of course; that would be disgusting.” He winked.

“And a large dog isn't obvious?” I shot back; ignoring his bawdy humor.

“Not as obvious as a gancanagh,” he said. “And as far as dogs go, we know tricks. I'd be happy to show you some of mine.”

“But an old dog can't learn any new ones.” I looked him up and down. “And I have a feeling you're a very old dog indeed.”

Conri leaned back his head and laughed. It was rich, deep, and had a lot of women in the room shivering in delight. I felt the breath catch in my throat. There was something about a masculine laugh that was hard to resist. Then there were those horns. I could imagine using them to pull his face down to mine. I'd never thought I'd find horns sexy, but they were. Oh, they *so* were.

“I like a sharp wit,” he said finally. “A mistress with a firm hand. Perhaps firm enough to make even a bargest stop roaming.”

“Oh, I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for that firm hand.” I smiled coyly.

“Already set your collar around another man's neck?” He waggled his brows at me.

“I hope not,” I huffed. “I'd hate to think I could tame him.”

“A collar doesn't mean he's tamed.” Conri leaned in again to whisper in my ear. “Just that he's taken.”

“I don't think you're the type to wear anyone's collar.” I smirked as he pulled back.

“You never know.” Conri licked his lips. “With the right touch, a woman could put nearly anything on me.”

“Oh, wow.” I laughed. “Is it wrong that I'm suddenly imagining you in lederhosen?”

“Terribly and utterly wrong.” He grimaced. “That line is supposed to evoke a different type of leather garment entirely; preferably black with lots of straps.”

“I'd rather see leather *armor* on a man.” I shook my head at his antics. “I think you'd do better with another girl.”

“At the very least, you'll live longer,” Tiernan said from my right. The dance had come to an end, and he seemed to know just where to be waiting for us.

“My Lord Shadowcall.” Conri nodded and gave Tiernan my hand with a flourish.

“My Lord Conri.” Tiernan nodded back but his tone was clipped.

“I think you were wrong about the collar,” Conri whispered to me before he backed away.

“Well, the men like you; that much is for certain.” Tiernan shook his head as he began to lead me around the dance space. “I'm not so sure how the women feel, though.”

“You've been enjoying this,” I accused.

“I've never seen anything so amusing as your efforts to dance the fey waltz and those of your would-be suitors trying to help you.” He chuckled.

“I think I did all right with Conri.” I smirked.

“Yes, well Conri knows all about handling women.” Tiernan grimaced.

“I kinda figured that.” I chuckled.

“And the bargest does his own style of dancing.” Tiernan nodded his head to where Conri was clutching a lady cat-sidhe as they swayed together.

“Yeah, it's called dirty.” I laughed some more. “There's a whole movie devoted to his style of dancing.”

“That's his style of *everything.*” Tiernan rolled his eyes. “Best to stay away from that one, Princess.”

“Your concern is noted.” I tried to look serious.

“That dog is only interested in getting at your—” Tiernan pointedly looked over my cleavage.

“My wobbly bits?” I offered, and he nearly choked. “My lovely lady lumps?”

“Your generous curves,” he corrected with a grin. “Once he's gotten his teeth in your flesh, he gets bored with the taste and moves on.”

“To another meaty bone?” I asked.

“Yes, precisely,” he said.

“He's a dog, I get it, but you're a jackass,” I said as I accidentally/on purpose stomped on his toe.

“Hey!” Tiernan pulled his foot away from me and shook back his long hair with an affronted attitude. “I am a Lord of the Wild Hunt, you know. I could carry you away from here in an instant and none could stop me.”

“I'm not sure if I'd want them to,” I purred, and his eyes flashed as he inhaled sharply.

Tiernan looked incredible, in case I haven't mentioned that. He was wearing a white velvet tunic embroidered with intricate designs of fairy creatures along both hem and cuffs. His pants were

cream leather and so were his boots but his belt was a startling black with a silver sword hanging from it. The white made him look like some mythical knight out to save his fair maiden and the muscled chest that showed through the slit of his tunic seemed to attest to his capabilities of doing just that. His hair was loosely pulled back so that it looked almost normal from the front. The platinum of his roots shone down to bright gold and then tawny yellow like a lion's mane before it disappeared behind his shoulders. The relief from his distracting hair gave his stunning facial features dominance.

A hard jaw, sharp cheekbones, and a nose which looked just a touch arrogant. His lips softened things a bit; slightly fuller on the bottom and perfect for pleasure. He was clean shaven to show off the inward slope of his cheeks and that glittering scar curling across his cheekbone, just below his shimmering eyes. I found myself following the line of the twisting scar and then moving beyond, back to the top curve of his ear that was revealed by his pulled back hair. I traced the swirl of his ear with my eyes; down to the lobe that begged to be bitten. His pulse beat rapidly beneath it but when I glanced up, his expression was controlled. A brow lifted arrogantly, and I flinched at being caught staring.

“You keep looking at me like that, and I won't be teasing any longer,” he growled, and I noticed the tightness around his smoldering eyes; all that control was costing him. “I'll be forced to carry you out of here and find the nearest alcove to ravish you in.”

“Wow.” I blinked and gave a little laugh. “*Ravish*, eh? I don't think anyone has ever said that to me.”

“You, my Twilight Star, should be ravished and savored and pleasured often,” he declared.

“Twilight Star,” I whispered. “Somehow, that doesn't sound silly when you say it.”

I knew we were surrounded by fairies, that my biological

father was sitting no more than six feet away from us, most likely staring at us right that very second, but I couldn't resist the pull of him any longer. I lifted my face to Tiernan's and it was all the encouragement he needed.

As if it were part of the dance, Tiernan's body eased forward against mine; pressing tighter and tighter to me until it felt as if there were nothing between us at all. I knew the curves of his chest; the wide expanse of muscle and the ridged belly beneath. I could feel the dips at the sides of his belly and the tension in his thick thighs. I saw it all in my mind as his lips pressed against me as firmly as his body did. He just held his lips there a moment and then slid them gently over mine; a caress with his mouth. His lips parted, and he inhaled softly; breathing me in. My tongue darted out to taste him—just the quickest of movements—but his flavor was like salt on ripe fruit; an enhancement of what was already so sweet.

Tiernan groaned and his tongue filled my mouth, his lips closing over mine to prevent any retreat. The feeling of his fingers digging into my back and of the silk of his hair in my own hands fell away in the rapture that was Tiernan's kiss. Back and forth, he lured my tongue within and then slid along it back into me. I was getting lightheaded, falling into his strong arms, when I felt the tingles of power flowing from my fingertips down to my feet. We pulled apart slowly, our breath ragged in the air between us, and then my eyes widened as I saw what those tingles of power had portended.

The whole court had stopped to stare at the spectacle we'd made. No, not the kiss. The star-filled, misty, lavender cloud we were standing on. We were levitating; kissing in the in-between on twilight fog. It was seeping from my fingers still; little trails of sparkling mist that fed our cushion of magic. The mist was spreading out with snake-like tendrils and instead of backing away from it, the other fairies were eagerly coming forward to touch it.

I watched as the magic twirled around the hands of all who

reached for it and then swept around them like a living thing. It flowed through their hair, flitted over their skin, and settled over them all until every face I looked at sparkled with lavender light. Keir came down from the high table, and I held a hand out to him automatically. He took it and as he did, mist formed below him and lifted him up to us. He grinned broadly, and I turned to take his offered arm. Tiernan took my other arm, and the three of us faced the Twilight Court.

"Are there any among you who would now deny that this is my daughter? That she has the right to rule?" Keir's voice boomed out. "Uncrowned and unknowing, she offers you her light despite the reluctance in some of your hearts. Let go of your biases and accept the truth; that she is our star!"

There was no cheering and no applause, just reverent silence as every fairy in the room sank to their knees. Even the pixies dropped to the floor in front of us and bent a knee as they bowed their heads; looking like miniature knights from some medieval story. I shivered, feeling out of place and so very wrong, but then the mist swirled up around me and seeped into my heart. For the very first time since stepping into the Twilight Castle, I felt at peace. I felt as if I belonged, but more importantly, I felt as if this, all of this, was rightfully mine.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I was having sex with Tiernan when it all went wrong.

It started out wonderful. Tiernan did all the right things; going slow at first, touching gently and then with more force. It was so good that I rushed him a little, and he was soon rising up above me, his smooth, sculpted chest under my hands and his heartbeat thudding wildly against my fingers.

The sable ends of his hair were sweeping forward faster and faster; teasing me with brief glimpses of his face. Then that inky darkness started seeping up the strands; devouring the light around him until his hair was completely black. It grew longer, pooling around us, until it blocked my view of him completely. I reached up to brush the hair away from his face.

Staring down at me were the eyes of a stranger. Even the body laying between my thighs had changed. This man was thinner than Tiernan, physically fit but not with the warrior's bulk that I preferred. His skin was paler too—pure white like Iain's—and amid all that black hair, he looked like the Moon made flesh. His lips were pressed together in a relentless line—a sullen slash across his face—but his eyes were emotionless. Or perhaps they just seemed that way because they were completely black, rim-to-rim, like the eyes of some predatory beast.

There was something familiar about the point of his chin or perhaps it was the slope of his jaw, but I couldn't figure out where I'd seen it before. I was about to ask him who he was when his large hands circled my throat and started squeezing. I gasped for air; my hands clawing at his, my feet thrumming against the bed, and my hips bucking wildly in an effort to throw him off, but his

grip was unfailing.

His lips twisted into a smile, and he leaned forward to press them gently against mine as he moved his body against me; mimicking the intimate act I'd been enjoying with Tiernan mere moments before. Despite the mocking motion, I could feel him flaccid against my thigh. No, this wasn't about sex; it was about death and possibly humiliation. I stared at him in horror as he continued to strangle me and then I used my pyrokinesis to light his beautiful hair on fire.

His eyes widened as the fire surged up to his face but then he just casually shook his head and the flames went out. I called my iron dagger to me—apportated it into my hand—but he flung his own hand out and the knife went darting away as he laughed viciously.

“That iron does not truly exist here, little star,” he purred, “and you're not powerful enough to stop me from extinguishing your light. Extinguishing an Extinguisher.” He laughed again. “How poetic. Do you like poetry? I do. Very much. Words are lovely; so many meanings depending on how you pair them or say them... and so much power for those with the magic to wield them. Too bad you don't know any powerful words to use against me, but you wouldn't be able to speak them anyway. Not with my hands at your throat.”

My own hands flung out blindly for help; scratching at the silk sheet and then the open air. His face started to blur, and I could hear my heartbeat slowing to a fatal dirge. The calamitous cadence filled my head, and I knew death was coming closer with every pause of my heart. But then a sharp pain shot through my arm, and I sat up; gasping for air.

My hands flew to my throat as the breath sawed in and out of my lungs and then a pitiful whimper alerted me to Cat's presence beside me. I blinked down at her in shock; trying to sort out what had just happened. My left forearm ached, and I lowered

it to see a large bite on it; blood dripping onto the silvery sheets.

“You bit me?” I rasped.

Cat whined again; edging forward to lick at my wound.

Then her eyes darted to the foot of the bed, and she began to growl. I tensed but saw nothing there, just a shimmer; a disturbance in the air that coasted across me before disappearing entirely. Cat quieted and looked at me again with grim intensity.

“It was a dream,” I whispered, “and you woke me from it, didn't you?” She yipped and sat up; her head towering over me. “Good girl.” I stretched a hand up to her and her head fell into my lap with a heavy thud. “Thank you.”

Cat's tail started wagging back and forth over the tangled blankets with canine delight as I tried to recall everything that had happened in the nightmare. My fingers traced over the abused flesh at my throat, and I swallowed hard, past the pain.

“Who was that?” I whispered to the night and the dark seemed to shiver as if it knew the answer.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It was the morning of my coronation but instead of preparing for the event, I was sitting at the long table in my bedroom with Keir, Tiernan, and four of Keir's most trusted soldiers; including Torquil, the knight who had escorted us to the castle the day before. Cat was seated on the floor beside my chair and her presence was more comforting than I'd ever thought it could be.

A healer had tended the bite on my arm. Her name was Maggidh and she was demurely soft-spoken but had proudly informed me that she was the first born of the twilight healers. Healing was a rare gift among the Fey and both the Seelie and Unseelie courts had very few healers, but the Twilight Court had been blessed with several. Most of whom were descended from Maggidh. She believed it was due to the neutral nature of our court; that healing magic naturally gravitated toward peaceful conditions. Whatever the reason was, I was glad for her help. The dog bite had taken mere moments for her to heal; leaving no scar at all, only a light pink splotch... which was peculiarly itchy. I scratched at it absentmindedly as the men argued.

“This is an act of war!” Torquil slammed his fist onto the table, and I blinked in surprise. “We must ride on the Unseelie and avenge the attempted murder of our princess.”

“She's not technically a princess yet,” Tiernan pointed out; earning an enraged look from Torquil.

Evidently, that little levitation stunt the night before had cemented my bond with the Twilight Fey, and they already considered me to be their princess, despite the fact that I'd yet to be

crowned. Yes, they'd been affording me the title of Princess already, but I think that had been out of respect for Keir and now it was out of respect for me. Who knew a little sparkly cloud could do so much? Maybe I would check out a rave sometime.

"He's right, Torquil." Keir held up his hand before the knight said anything more. "If she were, then the Sluagh would already be seeking vengeance on her behalf."

"She's still your daughter." Torquil shot a look at me; his icy blue eyes warming for just a second.

I started a little at the look. I hadn't expected interest from Torquil, or anyone else for that matter. Not after making a clear and obvious choice to be with Tiernan. Then again, I was in a world where infidelity, even in a marriage, was sanctioned as long as it was the call of Danu. Then there was what Mairte had said about fairies being free to take lovers without social censure. So, maybe my settling on Tiernan wasn't such a deterrent to other men.

"Yes, she's still my daughter," Keir agreed, "and I already have numerous grievances against Uisdean for his past behavior. That he would now enter Seren's dreams in an attempt to murder her himself shows just how desperate he's become. The coronation must go ahead as planned. Perhaps we should even perform it sooner."

"I agree, Your Majesty," Tiernan said.

I was still reeling from the knowledge that the man who had tried to strangle me had been my Uncle and was also most likely the man who had killed my mother. I had described him to Keir that morning, and he'd instantly known who it was. I'd left out the part about how intimate Uisdean had become with me while he tried to choke me to death. That was one humiliation I'd take to the grave. Okay, so that wasn't the best choice of words.

"I still don't understand what happened," I whispered with confusion. "How could he kill me in a dream? He wasn't even

there. Not really."

"But he was, Your Highness." Torquil leaned across the table to me. "King Uisdean has the magic of dream-roaming; the power to send a part of himself into another person's dream. It gives him enough substance to be able to interact with you in your mind. If he can convince you that you're dead, you will die in actuality. We who were born in Fairy know how to protect ourselves in dreams but it's clear that you were never taught the skill. King Uisdean took advantage of that."

"If I was so convinced it was real, why didn't my iron dagger work against him?" I waved a hand toward the bed, where my little dagger lay in its sheath beside my short-sword. I'd laid them there after speaking with Keir that morning. Their proximity made me feel better.

The men cast wary looks at my weapons. Wary enough that I frowned and got up to put them away. I guess I'd need to be more careful with them. Now that the Twilight Fey were starting to like me, the last thing I wanted to do was make them uncomfortable. I put the sword and dagger in my dressing room and then returned to my seat. They all visibly relaxed.

"Sorry about that" I grimaced. "But why didn't it work against him if even their proximity makes you guys nervous?"

"His *physical* body wasn't here," Tiernan said simply. "It was literally all in your head. *He* was in your head."

"Well, that's going to make family reunions awkward," I said. "Who knows what else he saw in there."

"There will be no reunion with King Uisdean, Princess," Torquil said, and both Tiernan and Keir stifled their laughter. "What did I say?" Torquil looked at Keir.

"She was making a jest," Keir said gently, and the knight stiffened.

“Sorry.” I gave him a smile. “I guess it's human nature to make light of tense situations.”

“Fairies appreciate levity as well,” Tiernan protested. “It's just Torquil who has no sense of humor.”

“My Lord Shadowcall, may I remind you who is truly a member of this court?” Torquil spat, and the whole table went silent.

“And may I remind you that he saved my life twice already,” I spoke before Tiernan could, but instead of being grateful, he shot me an angry look.

“I can speak for myself, Your Highness.” Tiernan glared at me.

“Wow.” I blinked and shook my head. “Go on then, Legolas. Speak up.”

“Do my ears look pointed to you, *Twilight Princess?*” He asked.

“No,” I said slowly.

“Because I am not an elf!” Tiernan snapped.

“I thought elves were fairies,” I mused casually; totally unperturbed by his show of temper.

“Yes, like a puka is a fairy.” Tiernan waved at Cat. “That does not make all of us furry, does it?”

“Valid,” I agreed. “But Tolkien—”

“Tolkien was wrong!” Legolas—I mean Tiernan—flung his hands out in exasperation.

“Enough!” Keir sliced his hand through the air; leaving a trail of stardust behind it. Everyone froze. I had no idea something

so sparkly could be so intimidating “Tiernan has long been accepted into this court, and I will not be disgraced by listening to him defend his place here. He is a Twilight fairy, Torquil. You know that and have embraced it up until the moment you saw him embracing my daughter.”

“Don't you think she should be with a true Twilight fairy?” Torquil asked instead of conceding.

“You mean like Conri?” I smirked; earning a nasty look from both Torquil and Tiernan. “What? He's a bargest, right? That's one of the few true Twilight races.”

“A *lesser* race.” Torquil frowned, completely confused and completely ignorant of his elitist attitude. “He's not a Twilight sidhe.”

“But Tiernan is,” Keir growled, and Torquil sat back; finally cowed enough to nod. “Good. Now, if you two curs would stop fighting over my long lost daughter like a bloody bone, we could get on with the discussion of what to do about my murdering brother!”

Keir's last words echoed through the room, and Cat let out a little whine. I reached out automatically to soothe her.

“I think an afternoon coronation would be lovely, Your Majesty,” Ainsley, one of the other knights, said cheerfully.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I felt ridiculous, but I guess that was getting to be the norm for me. My coronation gown was not about showing off my assets, it was about showing off my lineage and so the neckline went all the way up to my throat. Then it flowed out in sleeves which got wider as they went until they belled around my wrists as if they'd forgotten they were sleeves entirely and believed themselves to be skirts. The real skirt was even more full, with a train so long that I had no idea how I'd get down the stairs without catching it on something.

The gown was made of layers upon layers of silky gauze in colors deepening from pale lavender to black. The black fabric was laid closest to my skin, so although the gown gave the illusion that it was transparent, with all its shifting sheer layers, it was completely modest. The top layer was dusted with diamonds, sparkling like stars across the celestial sphere of my dress. Beneath the hem, the toes of my black silk shoes poked out, revealing yet more diamonds.

Over this frothy monstrosity of femininity was a silver necklace that was more like a collar; a wide thing with amethysts and diamonds set into it with wild abandon. I wore matching earrings as well as a huge ring on my finger; silver with an amethyst the size of my thumb surrounded by little diamonds. Over all of this was a plum velvet cape edged in black fur. It was affixed to my shoulders with two star-shaped pins, one on each side, with a silver chain crossing my chest to connect them. My hair was pulled back sleekly over the cape; nearly blending in with the dark material.

“I just hope I don't have to hold a ball and wand,” I

grumbled.

“An orb and scepter,” Mairte corrected, as my other attendants—several sidhe ladies—giggled.

“Am I going to have to hold an *orb* and a *scepter*?” I clarified.

“No, this isn't England.” Mairte rolled her eyes.

“Well, thank God for that,” I huffed, and the sidhe women gasped. “What did I say now?”

“God.” laughed Mairte. “Here, we usually say 'Goddess' or 'Danu' if we want to get specific. To imply that a male deity could birth a race is slightly offensive to us.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said over my shoulder to the women.

“It's of no consequence, Your Highness,” Elena, a fairy with bright orange hair, said sweetly. “You'll learn our ways soon enough.”

“Thanks, Elena.” I sighed and looked over at Cat, who had been groomed and adorned as well since we were pretty sure she wouldn't sit meekly on the sidelines while I was crowned. “I'm glad you have to suffer this humiliation with me,” I said to Cat, and she whined. “Misery loves company, my friend.”

Cat was wearing a thick collar of silver set with amethysts, similar to my necklace, and a bright purple ribbon was tied onto the base of her tail. She kept wagging it across the floor but the ribbon had been knotted so it wouldn't come undone and none of her efforts paid off. She gave a violent body shake; causing the collar to twist around.

“I know just how you feel.” I laughed.

“It's time, Your Highness.” Tiernan poked his head into the room, and his eyes widened when he saw me.

“Don't say it.” I pointed a finger at him, and he bit his lip as he blinked innocently. “Don't you say it.”

“You look...” He started to grin.

“Tiernan,” I growled.

“You look lovely, Your Highness.” Tiernan softened his smile and held out his hand. “Your father is waiting.”

“I look like I'm my own galaxy,” I muttered as I stomped over to him. “In a galaxy-dress far, far away a woman is crowned princess.”

I took Tiernan's arm and let him lead me out of the room even though he was laughing at me. The ladies and Cat followed after us. We paraded through the halls and down the main stairway like a bunch of Shakespearean actors at a Renn Fair. My ladies-in-waiting carried the end of my train so it wouldn't get snagged on anything, thank god... I mean Goddess. I shook my head and tried to get into a more serious frame of mind. This was not a play; this was my coronation. I was about to truly become a non-vampire Twilight, Fairy, Star Princess. I glanced down at Cat and rolled my eyes. Ridiculous.

We went through a door on our left and then wound our way through a long hallway until we approached a tall, arched doorway bordered in silver. All sense of the ridiculous faded as I peered into the room and saw the long length of purple runner waiting for me to walk down. There was a dais at its end with two very impressive thrones and one very impressive king standing on it.

My father.

I stopped at the door and my fairy attendants, including Tiernan, drifted to the sides and into the mass of fairies who were gathered to see me crowned. I'd have to walk the rest of the way on my own. Well, not entirely, I looked down at Cat and smiled.

“You ready to do this?” I whispered to her, and she nudged her head beneath my hand.

I gave her an absent scratch but before I could step forward, Cat changed; shifting from dog into horse. The collar creaked and burst apart—sending silver and stones shooting into the walls like shrapnel—but the ribbon remained on her long tail. She was kneeling on the ground; looking up at me with her soft, horse eyes, and I just gaped at her. She nickered and nudged me again with her pale pink nose.

“All right then,” I huffed a little laugh. “I guess I won't be walking after all.”

I slid over her bare back and spread my train and cape behind us; praying she wouldn't step on them as she stood. I shouldn't have worried. Cat was graceful in this form, and she stood effortlessly; bowing her head as we entered the room to the sudden silence of intense fairy attention.

I clenched my fingers in her silky mane, unlike any horse hair I'd ever felt, and lifted my head to see my fairy father's smiling face. He was dressed in colors to match mine; a similar collar at his throat and on his head he wore a crown which was even more elaborate than the one he'd worn the night before. This one had spikes all the way around it and each spike was topped with a diamond star. I focused on him; telling myself over and over that I wouldn't glance behind me to see how my train was doing.

Nope, wouldn't do it. Not going to do it. The train is fine, Seren, this is your damn coronation; ignore the train. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the train in a perfect fall of fabric stretching out behind me... and Tiernan standing at the back of the hall; watching me with a gentle expression. I gave him a little smile, and he returned it before I faced the dais again.

This dais was higher than the one in the dining hall. It had ten steps of lavender stone leading up to a circular space which the

thrones were set upon. The throne on the left was larger than the one on the right but other than that, they were identical. Made from intricately carved pieces of wood, their blackened feet faded up into purple and then lightened to lavender near the top. The peaks at center back were both adorned with a silver star and the inset cushions were deep purple velvet. Between the thrones was a small table holding a purple cushion which in turn held a feminine version of Keir's crown. Then, beneath it all; the thrones, the table, and the fairy king, was a round, silver rug. The purple runner led up the stairs straight to it.

When I reached the bottom step, Keir came over to help me down from Cat's back. His hands went to my waist, and he lifted me easily; placing me gently on the floor. The stars in his eyes were shining; sending twinkling light over his cheekbones, as he lowered his face to kiss my cheek.

“Well done, Seren,” Keir whispered and then gave Cat's neck a pat. “And well done, Cat.”

Cat gave a happy huff before Keir stood back and held his arm out to me. I took it with a nervous smile and ascended the steps with him. There was no priest to crown me; no one up there but Keir and me. He led me to stand in front of the smaller throne and then released my hand. I twisted a little, trying to pull my train up the stairs, but it was so long that it draped over the top three steps no matter what I did. I gave up on it and looked up to see that Keir had turned to address the crowd.

“As all of you know,” he began, “this is a day I've long been anticipating. Our star has finally come home, and I am delighted to stand here before you and crown your princess.”

A cheer rose from the Twilight Fey as their king reached for the crown set out between the thrones. He lifted it high for everyone to see and then turned and placed it gently on my head.

“Before Danu and all of you, my Twilight Fey, I crown the

daughter of my blood, Seren Bloodthorn, as Princess of the Twilight Court," Keir spoke with a steady, serious tone. "Let all of Fairy know her to be my heir and may the Goddess smile upon her."

I shivered as the crown sank onto my head and a wave of magic rushed through me. I felt it move outward; into the ground and the fairies around us. A low sigh flowed from them, and I sighed myself as the magic seemed to settle into my bones. Seren Bloodthorn. Not Sloane. It felt good and right but also like a horrible betrayal. Couldn't I be both? I looked up at Keir and found myself blinking back tears. He smiled gently and framed my face with his hands.

"You're safe now," he whispered. "The Court has recognized you as my heir. Let go of the past I see shimmering in your eyes and embrace us, your true family."

"I'll try." I swallowed hard.

"Good." Keir kissed my cheek and then turned to face the room with my hand held in his. "Your new princess!" He shouted. "Princess Seren, our Twilight Star!"

My eyes sought out Tiernan as his nickname for me was made public, and he gave a happy shrug. I guess he didn't mind. Although, I didn't like the idea that others would be using his name for me. It had seemed private and sweet before but now it was just another silly title. I sighed. If that was the worst of what I'd have to deal with as a princess, then I'd be supremely grateful for it.

Keir sat us in our thrones as the fairies cheered and then Cat shifted back into her canine form and raced up the stairs to sit between us; knocking the table aside as if it had offended her by trying to take her place. Keir laughed and scratched Cat's head as the Twilight Fey began to move forward; forming a line before the dais. At a wave of Keir's hand, they made their way up the steps, one-by-one, and knelt before me to pledge their fealty. I stumbled

my way through my responses with Keir's help but when it was Tiernan's turn, I nearly lost my composure.

I was an extinguisher. I wasn't a princess to be knelt to or protected. I was the one who did the protecting. I was supposed to be dressed in jeans and heavy boots not silks and high heels. This was not my life. I felt like an impostor or even worse, a traitor.

Tiernan must have seen the panic in my eyes because he increased the pressure on my hand and gave it a lingering kiss before he said, “I vow fealty to the Twilight Star, daughter of my king, heir to the Twilight throne, and Extinguisher of those who would stand against us.”

Applause came from the fairies behind him, and I gave him a grateful smile. Although, the others didn't realize it, Tiernan had just secretly told me that I was still a Sloane; still the woman I was raised to be. I may have just been crowned the Twilight Princess, but I was an extinguisher long before I had ever set foot in Fairy, and I would be one until my own light went out forever.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Now that I'm safe,” I said slowly to Keir, “I'd like to go back to San Francisco and make sure my Dad is all right.”

It was late at night; my coronal celebration had finally wound down and Keir had escorted me to my bedroom. He followed me in; helping me gather my long train before he shut the door behind us. Cat went straight to the bed and did her usual three circles before she curled into a fur-ball and went to sleep. Keir frowned and waved us over to the couches before the fireplace. He glanced pointedly at the piled logs and then over at me. I lit them with a thought, and he smiled delightedly as he took a seat. I sat beside him; my elaborate dress foaming around us and over the side of the couch. I punched my arms down into my lap; flattening the puffiness like risen dough.

“I can send someone to check on Ewan,” Keir said reasonably. “There's no call for you to risk the trip.”

“I thought you said that I was safe now,” I shot back.

“As safe as I can make you,” he amended. “That doesn't mean my brother will cease his efforts to stop you from sitting on the Twilight throne. He's not so easily swayed.”

“So, my life is still in danger,” I stated calmly.

“Not exactly,” he said and frowned. “He can't kill you anymore but there are other ways to prevent you from ruling.”

“What? Lock me in a dungeon?” I huffed and then froze when Keir stared at me intently. “He could, couldn't he?”

“That would be an option,” Keir agreed grimly. “Now that

you have awakened your fairy magic, you will stop aging, Seren. You have claimed your sidhe immortality."

"What?" I gaped at him. I wasn't sure if I wanted to live forever. "No one told me that was part of the deal."

"This isn't a deal, Daughter," he said sternly. "These are the facts of your life. You are a sidhe and that makes you immortal... unless someone were to kill you, that is. I, too, am immortal so, hopefully, you will never have to rule alone but the threat of you becoming Queen is enough to make my brother desperate to prevent it."

"So, not only would I be imprisoned, but I'd also be imprisoned forever?" I whispered.

"It's a possibility," he whispered. "Similar things have been done to circumvent the Sluagh."

"Well, at least he can't kill me," I said dryly.

"Now, you see why I don't want you to take the risk," he said.

"But I have to," I insisted. "I can't just disappear from my dad's life. I owe him more than that. He raised me and trained me. He loves me, he's my father."

"Yes, I know you think of him as such." Keir looked stricken.

"Look, I realize that this is hard for you too, and I want to have a relationship with you, but I can't just turn off my feelings for the man who I've thought of as my father since I first knew what that word meant."

"I understand." He sighed deeply. "And I understand why you need to see him. Perhaps in a couple of months, we can send an army with you into the Human Realm—"

“Months?” I interrupted. “*Army*? No, I need to see him now. Tomorrow or the next day. I can't let him stew and wonder what's happening to me. That's not fair to him... and I'm not taking a fairy army into the Human Realm. That could be disastrous.”

Keir was silent for a long moment before he nodded. “All right, but Tiernan will go with you and so will Torquil.”

“Aw, Dad, not Torquil too,” I whined like a teenager and then gaped at him in shock. Had I just called him “Dad?”

Keir laughed loud and vibrantly and then pulled me into a hug. “Those careless words have made me so happy.”

I grimaced against his chest but then felt it shift into a smile.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

What my fairy father forgot to mention was that he would still be sending an army with me. Okay, maybe not an army; ten knights, not including Tiernan and Torquil, but still, I hadn't been expecting so many. They were going to wait in Fairy, outside the entrance to the Human Realm, until I returned. This way they could guard me on my journey through Fairy; to the fairy mound and back. Torquil and Tiernan would be my guards for the rest of my trip.

Neither man was happy with the other's attendance and their ire was almost comical. Except that Torquil was such a stuck-up, hard ass that he irritated me nearly as much as he did Tiernan. If Torquil had gotten his way, I would have been traveling inside a carriage instead of riding in the open air on Cat's back. He had pointed out over and over that I'd be safer inside a carriage, and I'd pointed out that a carriage was nothing but a moving cage and traveling in one was like gift wrapping myself for my enemies. I'd won that argument in the end.

The departure from the Twilight Court had been more emotional than I'd thought it would be. First of all, I'd expected to leave Cat behind, but she made it very clear—through a series of horrible yowling episodes—that she was having none of that. Then there were well wishes from the fairies, and finally, Keir's goodbye which involved a crushing hug and quick swipes at his eyes. I was shocked to find my own eyes watering and had to come to terms with the fact that it had only taken a few days for me to get attached to these fairies.

“Princess Seren.” Torquil rode up beside me.

“Yes?” I looked over at him with ill-disguised impatience. He'd been bugging me the whole way and it had only been two hours. We still had miles to go.

“I haven't been to the Human Realm in centuries,” he said stiffly. “I was only going to ask what it's like.”

“I'm sorry, Torquil,” I said and sighed. “What exactly did you want to know?”

“I've heard that humans can fly now but that can't be true, is it?” He shot a nasty look at Tiernan when the Count started laughing.

“I assume that Tiernan is the one who told you this?” I asked as I shook my head at Tiernan.

“Yes, and he won't believe me,” Tiernan said from my left.

“It's true, but probably not in the way you think,” I said to Torquil. “We fly in machines. They're very large; some of the big ones can fit hundreds of people inside them.”

“You're teasing me now too, Your Highness,” Torquil chided.

“No, I swear it.” I held up my hand like I was a damn boy scout. “They use propulsion and air pressure to keep aloft.”

“What?” He frowned.

“Okay, have you ever taken a piece of paper and folded it so that it had wings?” I asked, and he stared at me blankly.

“He's not going to understand.” Tiernan shook his head. “He's old fey; they think everything wondrous is magic.”

“I can understand science as well, my Lord Shadowcall.” Torquil sniffed.

“The way it works is this; airplanes—the machines I mentioned—are made out of metal and shaped roughly like a bird. They have wings that don't flap but just stick out straight to the sides and are shaped in a way which makes air move faster over the top of them than underneath.” I glanced around and saw the other knights urging their mounts closer so they could listen. “Attached to these wings are engines which propel the plane forward. When the plane moves forward, the increased airspeed above the wings causes the air pressure—the force of the air against the wings—to decrease there as the air pressure beneath the wings is increased. The air pressure beneath—now stronger than that above the wings—pushes up against the wings and lifts the plane. Meanwhile, the engines propel the plane forward and you have flight. I know; it sounds complicated and impossible but it works.”

“Amazing.” Torquil shared looks with the other fairies. “What other kinds of machines are there?”

“Well, there are cars.” I shrugged. “Tiernan knows how to drive those.” I glanced at Tiernan.

“Poorly, according to the Princess,” he said and grinned.

“No, I said you drive like a maniac.” I laughed and looked over to see that Torquil was confused. “Oh, cars are like carriages without horses pulling them. They have engines like airplanes do.”

“My Lord Tiernan, you know how to handle one of these machines?” Iain, Tiernan's pale-skinned friend, asked.

“Sure, the Wild Hunt has one in every human city for our use,” he said. Then he grimaced. “Although, the one in San Francisco is now at the bottom of the bay.”

“Tell us more, Princess,” Iain urged.

“Um, okay; there are machines called computers which can access nearly all of the information known to humans. They can

connect people around the world; allowing for an exchange of knowledge much faster than any book could offer," I said.

"Anyone can access this knowledge?" Torquil's brows lifted. "Is it safe to provide unlimited information to the masses?"

"Sometimes, not so much," I admitted. "Dangerous information is protected with a type of shield and only certain people can get to it, but if you're smart enough, you can break through those shields and steal the information. It can be a type of warfare."

"I think I may have been wise to remain in Fairy," Torquil announced.

"Both realms have their dangers and their delights," I said.

"Yes, indeed." Tiernan gave me a wicked look. "I think I should like to accompany you to one of those clubs again. A non-Extinguisher one this time."

"I don't think I've ever been to one of those." I blinked as the thought struck me that the restrictions I'd lived with for my entire life no longer applied to me.

"What is a club?" Torquil narrowed his eyes on Tiernan. "I have a feeling you're not speaking of the weapon favored by trolls."

"No, not the weapon." Tiernan laughed and then looked Torquil over thoughtfully. "Maybe we should take you along with us. It might do you some good."

"I don't know if I like your implication, my lord." Torquil glared at Tiernan. "But if Your Highness is going, then I shall as well."

"Oh, I've heard someone say something like that before." I looked at Tiernan, and he chuckled.

“Don't you have to report back to the Wild Hunt?” Torquil pointedly asked Tiernan.

“I've already reported to both the Hunt and the European Fairy Council,” Tiernan replied calmly. “The Council wasn't thrilled to hear that Aideen's allegations were all an elaborate plot hatched by our king, but they understood King Keir's need to protect his daughter. In fact, they've assigned me to keep an eye on her.” He paused to grin at me. “They think it's a good opportunity to join forces with the humans in a goal we've been working toward separately. They see you as a link forged between us, Princess, and they were glad to hear that we were able to smooth things over with the Extinguishers and move ahead with this union.”

“Were we?” I lifted a brow at Tiernan. “Able to smooth things over with the Extinguishers, I mean.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Last I heard, they were simply relieved that there wasn't some horrible weapon being invented to kill humans. That and the fact that you're a fairy princess went a long way in smoothing ruffled feathers.”

“I wonder what my father will say to all of this?” I murmured to myself.

“His Majesty is the one who created the ruse, Princess.” Torquil frowned.

“She means the human who raised her.” Tiernan shot a quelling look at Torquil before he leaned over and took my hand. “He will understand, Seren. He loves you.”

“But the explanation he was given includes the fact that his wife cheated on him and his daughter is not actually his.” I squeezed Tiernan's hand. “He loved my mother and her betrayal is going to crush him.”

“He can't hold her actions against you,” Tiernan reasoned.

“You don't know my father.” I shook my head and sighed. “At least not that father.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

We made camp for the night in a little clearing. A massive purple and silver tent was erected for me to sleep in, despite my protests. A fairy princess doesn't sleep on a mat alongside her knights. It seemed like a waste of time and effort to me, but they actually got it up pretty quickly and mine wasn't the only tent they pitched. There was also a communal tent for the knights. I guess being closely attuned to nature didn't equate to wanting to sleep in her loving arms.

It was around dusk when a shivering coolness coasted over me and had me running from my tent. I had just changed into a new set of leather pants, which I'd chosen to wear along with short tunics for the journey. Thankfully, no one expected me to parade around in fancy dresses through the forest like some kind of Tolkien elf. The belt I'd been fastening over my tunic fell away as I rushed to the middle of our camp.

My skin was prickling and there were fluttering sensations at the edge of my consciousness; as if something was trying to get my attention. My heart raced as I peered through the thick growth of trees and shrubs crowding around the perimeter of the clearing. Something was approaching; I could feel it coming at me from all directions.

Leaves of golden green, pumpkin orange, rust, and deep emerald, shivered everywhere I looked. Fairy flowers with delicate fluted, sharp bladed, or swooping oval petals in all the colors you can imagine bent beneath a rushing wind that stopped just as suddenly as it started. The sky was lavender above me—darkening little-by-little to purple—and directly overhead there was a solitary twinkling star. I stared at it, completely enraptured for a moment,

until the murmuring of voices drew my attention back to the ground.

The knights were gathered in front of their tent; watching with awed expressions as fairy creatures came pouring out of the forest. Tiernan separated himself from the group and hurried over to stand beside me, hands out to his sides warily, but the other fairies seemed to find no threat among the animals and neither did I. I put my hand on Tiernan's and pushed down gently; letting him know it was all right. He gave me anxious eyes as I stepped forward and was instantly surrounded by the fairy creatures.

Animals resembling deer, predator cats, dogs, rabbits, rats, and even bears brushed against me. Birds circled above us, crying out sharply, and insects crawled beneath carefully placed paws. Fur of every color and every mixture of colors slid under my hands. Eyes—from the largest sparkling orbs to the tiniest black beads—stared at me while sharp talons dug happily into the earth around me and the flutter of wings brushed against my cheeks.

I held my arms out; welcoming them mentally and physically. I could feel them; their heartbeats and their souls like little shining orbs of flame hovering around me. The clearing was overflowing, the mass of bodies stretching back into the forest, but I was touching them all. We were joined together for one glorious moment and my heart had never been lighter.

I felt the luxurious lift of air beneath my wings, the rapturous delight of running through fragrant fields on steady paws, the rich taste of blood on my lips, and the bursting sweetness of berries in my mouth. I felt earth around me; a comforting womb. Scales over my flesh; protecting me from harm. Feathers ruffling in the wind; lifting me to the Moon. I was a creature of dusk and dawn; of twilight. I ruled the space between night and day. This was my moment—my world—and nothing could deny my power there.

Then the sun set completely, and the animals lowered

themselves around me as if they were my court. The birds came down to the earth, the insects massed together, and the beasts bowed their heads as if in prayer. I bowed with them, to them; acknowledging our new connection and the gratitude I felt for it. We were family, and we would look after one another. I vowed it silently to them as I felt their love and loyalty slide into my bones. Then the magic receded like the tide and they with it. When I opened my eyes again, they were gone.

The knights, however, were still there, and they came forward to where I was kneeling, and they knelt as well; pulling steel swords from their sheaths to lay before me. I blinked in confusion as Tiernan came up from behind me and laid his own weapon down.

"We gave you our fealty already, Princess Seren," Torquil whispered reverently, "but now we give you our hearts. You are our Twilight Star; the creatures of Twilight themselves have just crowned you. There is no truer testament to your sovereignty. Take our swords and our love for they are yours forever."

I was floundering—unsure of what to say or do—when a ripple of magic crept over my arms and guided me. I laid my hands upon the swords before me. They began to glow and then twinkle like the evening star above us and when I'd finally infused them all, I pulled away and saw that my fingers still glowed with magic. I stood and felt the power of the in-between rise inside me.

"For your swords—so nobly pledged to me—I give the blessing of victory that they shall never fail you," I spoke in a voice lower and sweeter than my own, and I knew it was the magic speaking through me. The Goddess Danu. Her presence was like the return of my mother—a loving, maternal embrace—and I let that love pour through me just as she urged me to do. "For your love—eternal and unconditional—I offer you mine in return. You will not face my enemies for me but *beside* me. We will stand together, and I will guard you as you guard me, value you as you value me, fight for your needs as you fight for mine. Will you

stand with me?"

"We will stand with you and for you," Tiernan's deep voice washed over me. "We are now the Star's Guard."

I turned toward Tiernan, and he lifted his hands to me. I wrapped mine around his and helped him to his feet. Then I did the same with every knight there. When I lifted the last knight, who also happened to be a woman, they all shifted into a circle around me, and I took their swords from the earth and laid them back in the hands which would wield them for me.

"That was a rare and beautiful thing," Gradh, the female knight, whispered.

"I've only heard tales of it," Tiernan admitted. "I didn't even understand it at first."

"The last time the animals swore fealty to a monarch was when they swore it to your father, Princess Seren," Ainsley added. "His brother, the Unseelie King, has never been crowned by his creatures."

"Hush," Torquil admonished him. "Don't sully this moment by speaking of the Dark King."

"Yes, you're right," Ainsley agreed. "I'm honored to be here and to be a member of your guard, Your Highness."

"The Star's Guard." I looked over the ten men and one woman standing before me. A shiver of magic coasted along my arms, and I knew these fairies had been chosen for me; not by my father but by Danu herself working through him. "Thank you," I whispered to her, to the goddess I'd only just met and yet whose love I could feel stronger than any I'd ever known.

Chapter Thirty

We reached the fairy mound which led to Gentry Technologies at mid-morning the next day. The knights had set up camp again; intending to wait there until Tiernan, Torquil, and I returned from the Human Realm. I was comforted to know that they'd be there when I returned, and that which gave me pause. How had I changed so much in such a short time? I told myself I couldn't be changed easily. Had that been a lie? Where was the self-reliant Extinguisher who kept the fairies in check? Where was Seren Sloane?

A soft nudge to my shoulder reminded me that Cat had shifted into her canine form and when I looked over at her, it was to find her staring up at me as if she had every intention of following me into the fairy mound. I sighed and held her face in my hands.

“Look, little Cat.” I smiled at the silliness of the name. “You need to stay here and guard my back while I go into the human world.” She whined, and I set stern eyes on her until she quieted. “I can't take you there; you'd cause a big scene, and we need to be as low profile as possible. You have to stay here.”

She whined again as I walked to the mound, but she stayed put. I looked over the door and frowned. On this side of the mound, the door didn't have a picture of a star over a fairy landscape. Instead, it had a picture of the Earth; a globe done in silver inlay over a gold background with North and South America facing out. Earth on this side, star on the other; it didn't take a genius to figure out that the doors were more than barriers, they were also signs showing where the path led.

I stood before that gold and silver sign, staring at the representation of Earth, and reached deep inside myself to find the old me. Something solid and shivering with intensity rose up in my chest. Ah, there she was; struggling with the weight of this new world but still alive, still fighting to be heard. It hadn't been a lie; a new appearance wouldn't change who I was, but new people could. New family and friends. *They* were changing me and maybe I could accept that but only under my conditions. I needed to get back into my birth world and remember who I was so that I'd have the strength to bring it forward and merge it into the person I was becoming.

I needed to get back to my father.

I turned the handle and pushed gently, but Tiernan laid a hand on mine with an apologetic smile. Oh, right; fairy princesses didn't walk into realms first. Their guards went ahead of them to make sure it was safe. That rankled a little, as I'm sure Tiernan knew it would, but the feeling gave me hope that I was still the woman I'd been raised to be.

I nodded and stepped back so Tiernan could go first. Then I went into the passage behind him, and Torquil took up the rear. The door closed behind Torquil silently and the narrow passage went dark. I tensed but kept walking forward and as I did, the passage brightened just a little; enough that I could see there was no longer earth surrounding us but empty space. I flinched; totally unprepared for that. The last time I'd been through the rath, I hadn't been paying attention.

“Don't stray from the path,” Torquil whispered and laid an encouraging hand on my arm. “Just keep walking forward and don't be scared, Your Highness; this is your place. You have power here. If you don't wish it to be dark, then bid the light to shine.”

“Just like that? I just ask light to appear?” I asked but even as I spoke, a bright glow began to illuminate the emptiness around us.

When I looked out into the vast nothing which eventually swallowed the light, I shivered and wished that I hadn't looked. The light immediately toned down to a softer glow which only revealed the ground beneath our feet. It was just a few steps more before Tiernan opened another golden door, and we stepped out into the basement of Gentry Technologies.

I took a relieved breath as I walked with Tiernan and Torquil across the grass of the brightly lit basement and up the winding staircase that I'd raced down just days earlier. I felt as if I were ascending from a dream—coming back to the surface of cold reality—and I had a horrible feeling that when I reached the top of the stairs, all of this magic would disappear. I'd be left alone; without stars in my eyes or fairy knights by my side.

We exited the stairwell, out onto the second floor, and the men remained. I reached a hand up and pulled forward the purple streak in my hair. It was all still there; it hadn't been a dream. I sighed in relief and then blinked in shock; I was *glad* to be this new me. Seren Bloodthorn Sloane, Fairy Princess of the Twilight Court. Damn, but I wanted this, I actually wanted this. What would that mean to my human father and what would it mean for my future?

The second floor looked to be in the midst of repairs. Sheets of plastic covered the carpet like a shroud and a heap of broken furniture lurked in the corner like a pile of bones, but the room was otherwise empty. I shivered nonetheless; remembering how that furniture had been trampled beneath the monstrous feet of the Sluagh. Tiernan led us to the elevators, and we took one down to the first floor.

Torquil looked nervous the entire time we were in that metal box; glancing around at the polished wood paneling and the numbered buttons. He glared at the speckled speaker in the ceiling which was filling the small space with annoying muzak. I gave his shoulder a reassuring pat and then the elevator dinged; announcing our arrival to the first floor. We came out into the main entrance of

Gentry and paused just for a moment as the noise and bustle of a prosperous business hit us. Then we strode outside, past the fascinated stares of both fairies and humans alike.

Once outside, I saw a shimmer trickle over Torquil and Tiernan; leaving them looking more human. Their eyes toned down—Tiernan's to human gray and Torquil's to baby blue—while Tiernan's hair went fully blond and Torquil's blue locks turned brown. I thought that maybe I should do the same—at least for my eyes—and as soon as I considered it, I felt a tingle settle over me. Tiernan glanced at me and nodded so I must have toned down the stars enough to pass for human. I didn't think the purple streak would draw much attention so I left it. We were in San Francisco after all. For that matter, the guys could have probably left their hair alone as well.

Tiernan went to the curb and a sleek black limo pulled up immediately. I gave him a surprised glance, and he shrugged. “Your father would not have you walking through San Francisco like a commoner. A princess travels in style.”

Tiernan opened the door for me and then paused; his eyes going back over my shoulder. I turned to see Torquil gaping around him like a five-year-old at the zoo for the very first time. I went back over to him and touched his arm gently.

“Torquil?” I gave him a little shake. “You okay, man?” I grinned a little as the words came out of my mouth. I was feeling more and more human by the second.

“What is that thing?” He stared at the limo.

“It's a car, like we told you about.” I pulled him forward. “The carriage with an engine. Come on, you'll get used to it.”

Torquil followed me into the cool interior and settled onto the leather seat across from me as Tiernan came in behind us. Torquil's hands slid over the wood accents and then the crystal tumblers that were secured on their shelf beside the little bar.

Tiernan shut the door and then tapped the tinted glass between us and the driver. The limousine started to glide forward, and Torquil's gaze widened as it shot out the window.

I followed his stare; trying to view the busy streets, filled with all sorts of unique individuals, as a fairy would see them. It probably felt much the same as it had for me when I'd first stepped into the courtyard of the Twilight Castle. Exciting but also terrifying. I leaned across the open space to Torquil and squeezed his hand. He looked over at me, took a deep breath, and went calm. I felt his pulse through his fingers; slowing to a steady rhythm.

“Thank you, Princess,” he said. “I'm all right now.”

“Good.” Tiernan slapped Torquil's shoulder. “Wait until you see the rest of it.”

Torquil swallowed visibly and both Tiernan and I chuckled, but soon the ride to the Human Council House was filled with questions. Once he'd gotten over his fear, Torquil became immensely curious and wanted to know everything about everything. I even had to explain bagels. It was like riding with a puppy who could talk.

When we pulled up to the curb in front of the joined Victorian houses, my stomach clenched. I was actually nervous to see my father. Would he even be here, or would he have gone back to Hawaii to wait for me there? I worried my lip as Tiernan helped me out of the car.

Before we reached the door to the house on the right, someone came barreling out of it and flew into me. I caught her and laughed; hugging Abby with relief. My whole body shuddered as I realized that I'd been anticipating the opposite reaction from my Extinguisher friends.

“Unfuckingbelievable!” Abby shouted as she pulled away and looked me over. “What happened to your hair?” She touched the purple. “And your clothes.” She looked over the tunic and

pants. “And what's with Fairy Ken over there? He looks lost.” She jerked her thumb at Torquil, who frowned at her in confusion.

“Whoa now.” I held up my hands, laughing. “I assume they told you about my—”

“Your fairyness?” She guffawed. “You really are a fucking fairy princess?! What the hell? I thought it was a joke.”

“So did I.” I joined in the laughter.

“Extinguisher Seren,” a stern voice came from the doorway on the left, and we all looked up to see Councilman Murdock walk down the steps. “We're relieved to see you're in good health.” He paused; looking at my head strangely for a second before he blinked and went on. “Please come inside with your entourage.”

“My *entourage*?” I whispered to Abby, and we giggled as we followed Murdock inside the house.

“Your father has been”—Murdock glanced at Tiernan and Torquil as he shut the door behind us—“unstable since he heard the news.”

“Is he all right?” I instantly went serious.

“He's unhurt physically.” Murdock sighed and gestured to a sitting room on our right. “Please, sit down, and I'll have some refreshment brought in. Extinguisher Abigail, return to your duties.”

“Yes, sir,” Abby said immediately but kissed my cheek and whispered to me before she left, “I'm so happy you're back.”

“Thanks, Abby.”

We all sat down as Murdock went to ask someone to bring us tea, and I began to fidget nervously. This was weird; he was treating me like visiting royalty instead of an extinguisher. Was that what I was now? Were they kicking me out? I looked up as

Murdock returned and waited for him to sit before I spoke.

"Am I still an extinguisher?" I saw that the question had startled him.

"Do you want to be, Your Highness?" He asked carefully.

"*Your Highness*? Really?" I grinned at him. "Come on, Councilman, it's still me. I used to play dodgeball with your son in your backyard, remember? You don't have to call me that."

"Oh thank God." Murdock groaned and then gave an unsteady laugh. "I had no idea how to proceed with you. There's no precedent for this."

"Well, let's just figure it out together," I suggested. "I don't know how much time I'll be spending here anymore, but I do want to continue being an extinguisher."

"Princess Seren"—Torquil blinked wide eyes at me—"I don't think your father will agree to that."

"Sir Torquil!" Tiernan snapped, and Torquil pressed his lips together tightly and straightened in his seat.

"My apologies, Your Highness," Torquil said stiffly.

"Relax, Torque." I nudged him with my shoulder. "You can speak your mind to me. I know King Keir will have issues with it, but he's going to have to deal with them. I'm not a normal fairy princess."

"That's for sure." Tiernan rolled his eyes.

"I don't know what kind of position we could place you in, Seren." Murdock frowned. "But having a fairy princess working with us would be an advantage that I'm sure the Human Council would be pleased to have, even if we don't know how to use you yet."

“You will not be *using* her at all,” Tiernan said in a vicious, low tone that had Murdock lurching back automatically.

“I didn't mean it like that.” Murdock lifted his hands, palms out.

“I know, Sir.” I elbowed Tiernan with a chiding look. “He's just a little on edge since there have been a few attempts on my life.”

“There has?” Murdock's eyebrow lifted as a lady came into the room carrying a tray of tea and tiny cakes. He waited until she left before continuing. “Would you not be safer here, Seren?”

“Actually, no, I don't think so.” I sighed but gave Tiernan a grateful smile when he poured me some tea. “I think Fairy is where I need to be right now, but I do want to continue work as an extinguisher, and I'll want to spend time with my dad. There must be a way I can help the Council even when I'm not here.”

“Well, there's always diplomatic missions,” he offered but before I could reply, Ewan Sloane came stumbling into the room.

Stumbling drunk and spitting mad.

“So, you *are* here,” Dad snarled at me, and both Tiernan and Torquil shot to their feet; hands going to their sword hilts.

“He's my father,” I snapped at them as I shot to my feet and rushed over to my dad. “I'm sorry I haven't been able to contact you. Were you worried?”

“Worried?” He scoffed. “About who? Some fairy's brat or the bastard child of my treacherous wife? Who should I have worried about, Seren?”

“I'm still *your* daughter, no matter who my biological father is. You'll always be my dad.” I reached a hand out to him.

“I have no daughter.” He shoved my hand away.

I drew back as if he'd slapped me.

“Come on, Dad. It's me; Seren,” I whispered. “You've been my father since the day I was born. I love you; nothing can change that.”

“You don't even look like Seren anymore,” Ewan growled as a length of spittle flew from his mouth. “Why is there purple in your hair? And it's longer, like one of the sidhe. You're different, I can feel it. Even your aura is different.” He waved a hand toward my head. “You're not my Seren.”

“My fairy blood changed me a little but it's only physical,” I tried to explain. “I'm still me inside.”

“You're no blood of mine.” Ewan narrowed his eyes at me. “I don't know why I didn't see it before. You're a foul fairy, and you don't belong here. Go back to your own realm.”

He turned to leave, and I shouted after him, “Dad!” His body jerked, but he kept walking. “Dad, please.” I moved to follow him, but Murdock grabbed my arm.

“Seren, let him go for now,” Murdock said with deep sympathy. “He needs to work through what Catriona did. He feels betrayed, and you're the living proof of that betrayal.”

“Dad!” I shouted; ignoring Murdock. “Dad, come back, it's you and me against the world, remember? It's you and me. Dad? Daddy!”

I crumpled, feeling suddenly like an orphaned child, and burst into tears. Muscled arms slid around me from behind and Tiernan's rich scent flowed over me. I collapsed back against him and then turned to hide my face in his chest.

Chapter Thirty-One

“I've planned an evening out,” Tiernan announced as he walked into the suite we were sharing with Torquil.

It wasn't the same suite we'd been in before—I think my father still occupied that one—but it had the same layout; open socializing area with an attached kitchen and rooms off to the sides. I'd been in the little kitchen, making me some tea, when he'd walked in.

“I don't want to go out,” I said immediately as I turned to face him.

I froze; the rest of my refusal dying on my lips. Tiernan was dressed in jeans and a cornflower blue, button down, silk shirt. The sleeves were rolled up to show off his muscular forearms; the kind of muscles warriors got from swinging swords and lifting heavy shields. His long hair was simply blond again but it streamed across his shoulders in careless luxury like an expensive accessory he'd forgotten about. His eyes were glamoured deep cerulean and although the coloring was completely normal, it was a striking look for him. The blue was nearly as brilliant as his natural silver and it commanded almost as much attention as the rest of him.

I wanted to keep staring into those eyes but his body was hard to resist. The sleek cut and thin material of the modern clothes gave more glimpses of Tiernan's mouthwatering physique than any velvet tunic had. The girth of his biceps was distractingly distinct and the silk clung to his chest; slipping into the dips and angles of his barbarian-build as if it were purposefully trying to drive me insane.

The muscled man parade didn't stop there. Torquil stood beside Tiernan dressed in a similar fashion; jeans and a collared, silk shirt. His was ivy green. Torque's hair was pulled back into a ponytail and was glamoured jaguar-black this time. It suited him better than the brown; making his baby blues spotlight bright. He filled out his clothes as well as Tiernan, but I restrained myself from ogling him and instead, set my gaze resolutely on his face. Torquil looked a bit nervous but managed to smile.

“Aren't they frickin' hot?!” Abby burst through the center of them like a showgirl out of a cake.

“Did you do this?” I asked with a chuckle.

“Uh, yeah,” she said like *duh*. “You think they could have pulled this off on their own?”

“I'm sure I could have managed to dress myself.” Tiernan gave me a beleaguered and affronted expression.

“Maybe you could have, but he definitely couldn't have.” Abby jerked a thumb at Torquil. “Fairy Ken almost looks human, eh?”

“Bite your tongue, woman,” Torquil huffed.

“This is his first time out of Fairy,” I explained to Abby.

“Yeah, he told me.” She laughed. “In between all the questions.”

“Now, back to my plans.” Tiernan came toward me.

“Wait.” I held a hand up, and he stopped halfway across the room; looking confused. “I need to see the back of your outfit first.”

“What? Why?” Tiernan frowned as Abby giggled.

“I just want to make sure that Abby got you the right pair

of jeans.” I blinked innocently. “I can't be seen in public with men in bad jeans. It would ruin my reputation.”

“Your what?” Tiernan frowned deeper. “Are you jesting?”

“Just turn around, Tiernan,” I huffed.

“Oh, for the love of the Goddess.” Tiernan groaned and turned; holding his arms out to the sides in exasperation. The jeans hugged the muscled curves of the most glorious pair of buttocks I've ever seen. Full enough to grab but so solid that I doubted it would be an easy task.

“Yep.” I swallowed past the dryness in my throat. “Those are definitely the right jeans. Definitely.”

“Pretty nice, huh?” Abby smirked. “I know how to pick a pair of jeans.”

“Damn those ass-covering tunics; may they all burn in Hell,” I mumbled.

“Are you satisfied?” Tiernan asked as he turned around, but then he caught my heated look and his expression changed entirely. A slow, knowing grin spread over his face as he approached me. When he was close enough to share body heat, he whispered, “Or could I do anything else to satisfy you?”

“Not presently.” I took a shaky breath. “But this is a damn good start.”

“Are you guys going to make out now?” Abby interrupted. “Cause Torquil and I can leave.”

“No, we cannot,” Torquil admonished her.

“You're a bit of a prude, huh?” Abby grimaced up at Torquil. “What are you, her chaperon? You know that she's a grown woman, right?”

“I am a knight of Fairy,” Torquil huffed. “A member of the elite Star's Guard. I am not a prude or a chaperon, I simply cannot leave my princess unattended in a hostile world.”

“Uh, first of all, what's the Star's Guard? It sounds like a celebrity bodyguard service.” Abby frowned. “And second, she's not exactly alone, *Prude*, and this is hardly a hostile environment. Unless they like things rough, in which case... I'm going to have to insist on video surveillance.”

“I have my own guard now,” I explained; ignoring her porn request. “Pretty groovy, huh?”

“Oh, damn!” Abby laughed. “Extinguisher Seren and her band of Fairy Men.”

“Shut up.” I laughed as Tiernan casually slid an arm around my waist. I admit that it felt good to be standing there with him like that. Almost normal.

“Seren Sloane and fairy dudes runnin' through the forest,” Abby sang her own words to the Robin Hood song, “Oodalalee, oodalalee, golly what a day.”

“I am not a prude!” Torquil shouted; interrupting Abby's rendition of the Disney classic.

“Sheesh, relax, T,” Abby huffed. “I said dudes, not prudes. Besides, you'll have lots of chances to prove that you're not a prude tonight.”

“What is it with you Extinguisher women and your penchant for shortening names to their first letter?” Tiernan asked me.

“We like things short and snappy.” Abby snapped her fingers. “Like me.”

“I don't know.” I cast a glance back at Tiernan's behind. “I

think I prefer things high and tight."

"And she's not talking about your haircut either!" Abby laughed as she came over and bumped fists with me. "Now, where are we going, Mr. Tight Ass?"

"Do not ever call me that again," Tiernan growled, but his lips twitched as he did so.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Monarch?” I looked from the sign above the club entrance to Tiernan as Abby and Torquil got out of the limo behind us.

“Where else would a princess party?” Abby asked. “Well done, Mr. Ti—”

“Do not.” Tiernan held up a finger to her.

“Tiernan,” she smiled sweetly as she finished the name. “I was going to say, Tiernan.”

“Uh-huh.” Tiernan grimaced.

“What does *XXX DVD* mean?” Torquil was staring across the street at a large sign which announced the availability of DVDs and an arcade.”

“I rest my case.” Abby shook her head. “He's a prude.”

“Princess?” Torquil looked to me for help.

“DVDs are plastic discs which are used to store information. Those, in particular, have movies on them; moving images used to entertain,” I tried to explain. “Like little pictures of real life; moving pictures... movies.”

“Yeah, except XXX means the movies are pornographic,” Abby added and then chuckled.

“Pornographic?” Torquil still looked confused.

“The boy doesn't even know what pornographic is!” Abby hooted. “Oh, please let me tell him.”

“Abby, come on, he's from Fairy; take it easy on him,” I chided.

“Aw, I'm just being affectionate.” She rubbed Torquil's arm good-naturedly but then her eyes widened. “Damn, honey, maybe we should have put you in a muscle-T. You're more fit than most Extinguisher men.”

“Abby!” I laughed.

“What?” She shrugged. “I can't appreciate a good physique?”

“Don't you have Jared's physique waiting for you back at the Council House?” I lifted an eyebrow.

“Eh.” She shrugged. “I'm not engaged yet.”

“I am not even getting into this conversation, Extinguisher Abby.” I rolled my eyes at her.

“Oh, come on; I'm just having some fun. Hey, look.” She pointed across the street. “There's an F-U War restaurant. Do you think it's run by hippies?”

“No, I think it's run by Chinese since its Fu, not F-U,” I corrected her.

“I got you off the silly subject of my boyfriend, though, didn't I?” Abby giggled and sashayed past us to the glass door of the club.

I cast a glance at the pawn shop next door and then the cheap hotel across the street and sighed. This club may be called Monarch, but it was in a less than noble area. That's what happens when you let a fairy pick the club.

I rethought my assessment as soon as I walked in the door. Although, I still wouldn't have named the place Monarch. *Circus* would have been more appropriate or maybe *Cirque* since there

was a gilded, Old World meets Band of Gypsies décor going on.

The room was narrow with two tangled balls of glowing tubes hanging from the ceiling. A slim length of sleek bar ran along the length of one side. Behind the bar was a glittering display of alcohol and above that was a burgundy wall decorated with autumnal swirls. To the right of the swirls was a round opening bordered with a gold frame. Within this hole, a female acrobat hung from a black hoop contraption and did all kinds of interesting maneuvers as she smiled seductively at her audience.

“This is—” Torquil stared up at the woman, and she winked at him.

“Fun?” Abby asked.

“Fascinating,” Torquil finished.

“Wanna drink or dance?” Abby lifted a brow at us.

“Drink,” I said.

“Dance,” Tiernan said.

Torquil stared at her blankly.

“Two to one; dancing wins!” Abby cheered and then grabbed a passing guy. “Hey, where's the dancing?”

“The basement.” The guy smiled at her. “You want me to __”

“No,” Abby cut him off with a smile and grabbed Torquil's arm, “thank you, we got it.”

“Oh, okay.” The guy nodded and kept walking.

“I think you've just been drafted into being Abby's date,” I said to Torquil.

“Date?” He frowned.

“Her companion for the evening,” Tiernan explained.

“Oh, well, I.” Torquil cleared his throat. “As you wish, my lady.” He bowed to Abby.

“As I wish?” Abby lifted her brows at me. “Sweet! Let's go!” And with that, she pulled him off into the club.

Tiernan and I shared amused looks as we followed after them. I ended up pressed tightly to him as we navigated the crowds and by the time we reached the basement, I wasn't enjoying myself. I kept thinking of my father and wondering if he was okay. I wanted to tell them to take me back to the Council House just in case Dad decided he wanted to see me, but one look at Tiernan's face changed my mind. He was obviously doing this to help me get my mind off my father, and I hated to wreck all his plans with my bad attitude.

“I seem to recall that you're much better at this type of dancing.” Tiernan smirked. “If you would just please refrain from stepping on my feet.”

“Yeah, yeah, very funny.” I looked over the packed basement.

Neon blue lights beamed down from the network of pipes covering the ceiling; casting the dancers in an undersea glow. No one seemed to notice or care about the lack of a proper ceiling; they were too busy dancing as best they could within the press of strangers. I sighed as Tiernan edged us into the mass of bodies and glanced over to see Torquil and Abby nearby. Torquil had the look of a man facing death; his horrified gaze set on Abby's thrashing movements in front of him.

“Just forget about everyone else and dance with me,” Tiernan spoke into my ear so I could hear him above the deafening music.

“That's a little hard to do.” I grimaced as someone bumped into my back.

“Is it?” He asked as he pulled me in against him and started moving us in a way I had no idea he was capable of.

Suddenly, the music softened and people backed away from us. Tiernan's thighs pressed against mine and his hands slid over my waist as mine slid up his back. I could feel the bass thrumming up through the cement floor; vibrating into my limbs and urging me to move against him. It felt wild, primal, and forbidden; as if we were breaking some kind of law, dancing like that. This couldn't be legal; not the way his hands tormented me or how his hips twisted and teased; skimming intimate places.

“I think I like human dancing better than the fey version.” Tiernan spun me around; pressing against my back as his hands roamed my stomach and his fingers edged into indecent territory.

“What did you do?” I started to look out at the club, but he swung me around again; drawing my attention back to his face.

“Don't look away; you'll ruin the magic,” he purred. “Light and shadows surround us.”

“And they'll disperse when we acknowledge the room again?” I asked.

“You learn fast, Twilight Star.” He smiled as his hands coasted up my arms to frame my face.

“And you're a damn good dancer, Mr. Tight Ass,” I said and was surprised when he only smiled wider.

“I think I'll have to purchase more of these jeans.” Tiernan's hands slid down my arms; pulling them down from his back to place firmly on his ass.

“I think that would be wise,” I said breathlessly; right

before his lips covered mine.

Chapter Thirty-Three

We danced until I was weak with wanting and finally pleaded for mercy. I didn't want to drink and suggested that we find a restaurant for a late dinner instead. They all agreed eagerly; I guess I wasn't the only one who had worked up an appetite. In fact, Torquil looked a little flushed when we walked out of Monarch.

“Oh, shoot; F-U War is closed,” Abby whined as we walked down the sidewalk.

“Abby.” I shook my head and chuckled.

“You know they named it that on purpose. I'm only being obliging.” Abby shot me a look over her shoulder since she was walking with Torquil, in front of me and Tiernan. She had her arm through Torque's, and he looked damned comfortable with it. That had me a little worried, but it wasn't any of my business. If Abby wanted to thwart convention by taking a fairy lover, who was I to tell her no?

“Maybe we should just call a cab and ask the driver—” I didn't finish the sentence because someone came running out of the alley beside us and tackled Torquil.

“What the hell?” Abby looked down at the rolling tangle of men in shock as more men poured out of the alley to confront us.

A boom shook the ground and the man attacking Torquil was flung back; hitting a wall and then sliding down it to sit in a stunned heap. Torquil jumped to his feet; instantly guiding Abby over to us so he could stand in front of us with Tiernan. Abby shot me a grimace, and I returned it before we slid to the sides of the men and dropped into fighting stances. Then I saw who was

attacking us.

“Brendan?” I straightened in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Showing you the error of your ways,” Brendan Murdock growled and then cast a dark look at Abby. “Ways which seem to be rubbing off on others.”

“F-U, Brendan!” Abby snarled. “When the Council hears about this, you're gonna get it.”

“And I'll be happy to inform them of your inappropriate behavior too, Extinguisher Abigail.” Brendan narrowed his eyes on my friend.

“Go home, Brendan,” I said and sighed. “I understand that you're upset but this isn't the way to handle it. I'm not even fully human anymore. You don't want to be with me.”

“No, I don't,” he spat; as in literally spat at my feet.

“Gross,” Abby huffed. “You're a cretin.”

“That doesn't mean I want you fornicating with a fairy either.” Brendan nodded at the four men he'd brought with him. All Extinguishers. They began to fan out.

“Fornicating with a fairy? Really?” I chuckled. “That's pretty good actually; I think I'll use that.”

“Be warned; we will use every power available to us in our defense,” Tiernan said grimly. “You have no idea what you're up against.”

“Yeah, a Lord of the Wild Hunt.” Brendan rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I can still kill you with iron.”

“You step one foot forward, Brendan, and you will regret it,” I declared. “How long you live to regret it depends on what

you do after taking that step."

Brendan was about to call my bluff when a sinister growl emerged from the same alley they'd just exited. All of us froze as the shadows seemed to slide away to reveal a huge dog; wider than a wolf, larger than a lion, perhaps proportionate to a small bear. Canine eyes burned in the darkness like the vengeful fires of Hell and when the streetlamps hit the beast, it glinted off fangs sharp enough to slice through bone like butter. He moved forward on massive paws—claws clicking on the cement—and it was as if the dark came with him. Then I saw that it was merely his midnight fur playing tricks on my eyes; his long, shaggy fur which nearly hid the black horns curving back from his temples.

The creature snarled and snapped his substantial jaws at the Extinguishers as he positioned himself in front of us. The men backed away with wide eyes, and the bargest followed. He barked—a deep and vicious sound—and kept barking like a rabid pitt bull. Spittle flew from his mouth as he leaped forward; snapping his teeth at the air.

"Kill the monster!" Brendan yelled as he rushed forward.

Iron blades glinted in the lamplight as the other men moved in to help Brendan. I heard a scream behind us and glanced over my shoulder to see a couple disappear around the corner. Oh, this was not good.

"Take care of that," Tiernan growled at Torquil, and the knight ran off after the couple. Then Tiernan lifted his hand and a shimmer surged around us. Shadows blended with light again, and we were enclosed in magic.

We moved forward to join the fight—Abby easing out to the left as I took the right—but before we could close the distance, the bargest's head shot out and his jaw closed over a hand holding an iron sword. The sound of breaking bone was added to the clang of metal as the sword fell from useless fingers, and then above all

of that, came pitiful screaming.

Quicker than I could track, the bargest transferred his bite to another opponent and more screams filled the night. Blood sprayed as the bargest shook his head, and I stepped aside to avoid the splatter. Two iron swords laid on the sidewalk between us and Brendan's group. I shared a quick look with Abby before we shot forward and snatched them up. We lifted the weapons as Tiernan came up beside the bargest and lifted his glowing hands.

“This is an unsanctioned fight,” one of the Extinguishers huffed. “We shouldn't even be here.”

“We can still take them!” Brendan grabbed one of the injured men and shook him.

The man stared at him as if he were insane.

I heard the sound of pounding footsteps and glanced behind me to see Torquil come running up. He stopped and stared hard at us, and I realized he couldn't see past Tiernan's illusion. Then he held out a hand and walked forward. The sound of ringing bells filled the air as the illusion broke and Torquil came up to stand next to Abby.

“It appears that I'm just in time.” Torquil grinned and spread his hands out to his sides in preparation for who knows what kind of magic.

“I'm done,” one of the injured men announced and as he turned away, the rest of them followed.

All except for Brendan, who stayed a moment longer to glare at me before he finally left with the others. The bargest gave a satisfied huff and looked up at me with what appeared to be a grin.

“What are you doing here, Conri?” I went to stand in front of him.

“You know this beast?” Abby looked from Conri to me and back again.

“Abby, he's a bargest.” I pointed to Conri's head. “See the horns?”

“Oh.” She seemed to remember what that meant and smiled. “Thanks for the help, Mr. Bargest. That was fun.” Then her eyes went wide as Conri shifted into human form. Very naked human form.

“The name is *Lord Conri*,” Conri said with a sexy smile.

“Not *here*, Conri,” I snapped and looked around us anxiously.

“I think his previous appearance drew more attention than this one,” Tiernan grumbled. “We had no need of your assistance, Lord Conri. The matter was being handled.”

“You should take a tip from the pretty lady and just thank me.” Conri eased closer to me, and I tried my very best not to ogle him but it was hard... er difficult. Conri grinned at my efforts and took my hand to kiss it. “Are you all right, Princess Seren?”

“Conri, what are you doing here?” I asked again.

“I felt your crowning and went to investigate,” he said; keeping my hand firmly in his. I pulled it away from him, and he pouted.

“My crowning?” I frowned.

“He means the way you were crowned by the animals,” Torquil offered as he pulled his shirt off and handed it to Conri. “At least cover yourself, my lord.”

Abby made a strangled sound as she floundered under the dilemma of who to set her eyes on. She kept shifting her gaze back and forth between Torquil's beautiful chest and Conri's beautiful...

everything.

“Feeling inadequate?” Conri smirked at Torquil. “Keep your shirt; I've brought my own clothes.”

Conri disappeared back into the alley and emerged a few moments later wearing jeans, a white T-shirt, and a black leather jacket. Abby sighed, and I wasn't sure if it was from appreciation of how good he looked in the outfit or disappointment that Conri was now covered.

“And then?” I got Conri back on subject.

“And then I watched.” He shrugged. “I saw you create your Star's Guard and then I saw you enter the Human Realm. I decided to follow.”

“Why would you follow us?” Tiernan frowned.

“Because I want to be on your Guard, Princess Seren.” Conri's expression went serious and he dropped down to one knee. “Let me serve you. I promise to never fail you. I will defend you until my last breath.”

“Oh, wow,” Abby whispered. “I want to be a fairy princess.”

“The Star's Guard is for knights only.” Torquil narrowed his eyes at the bargest, but Conri kept his stare set on me. “*Sidhe* knights.”

“Danu chose my guard, not I,” I said to Conri; ignoring Torquil.

“It's *your* guard”—Conri lifted a thick brow in challenge —“you can appoint whomever you like.”

“And you'll be happy to take advantage of her ignorance to further your own interests,” Torquil snapped.

“My Lord Torquil,” Tiernan ground out. “You just called Princess Seren ignorant.”

“Forgive me, Your Highness,” Torquil said immediately. “I meant ignorant in the way of our politics. I just don't want to see you taken advantage of.”

“And how would he be taking advantage of me?” I lifted a brow at Torquil.

“Lesser fey do not belong on royal guards,” Torquil stammered.

“Why not?” I asked and felt Tiernan tense beside me. He was pressed against my side but a little behind me; guarding and supporting me all at once.

“It's too great an honor to be given to a lesser.” Torquil's jaw clenched.

“So, only sidhe may defend and possibly die for their princess?” I scowled. “Because it seems to me that Conri did the best job of defending me tonight.”

“That's unfair, Your Highness,” Torquil said. “I was ready to protect you, but the bargest stole the fight and then I had to chase those humans and erase their memory of us.”

“Would you view humans as lesser?” I asked softly, and Torquil's jaw dropped.

“No, I...” he glanced at Abby and then back at me. “Of course not.”

“But a fellow fairy is?” I continued.

“Princess Seren, you're judging millennia of ingrained biases and tradition with a modern attitude,” Tiernan said gently. “We were taught to think this way.”

“Which is why I won't hold it against Torquil,” I said gently. “I think Conri's actions have proven his capabilities as both a fighter and a tracker. He has skills that no sidhe possesses and the rather stubborn intention of using those skills to defend me. I think he'd be a good choice for the Guard, don't you, Tiernan?”

“I do.” Tiernan gave a reluctant sigh. “You'll raise a few eyebrows, but I think this might be a good change for us.”

“My Lord Tiernan!” Torquil gaped at him.

“There are reasons for segregation,” Tiernan mused. “Reasons that are perhaps outdated in this instance. Princess Seren is an unusual royal and it seems fitting that her Guard be equally unique.”

“I still protest,” Torquil said sternly.

“He's not proposing marriage.” Tiernan shrugged. “He simply asks to defend her, and I can find no fault with that. Does he have an eye for advancement? Oh, yes, I'm sure of it, but that could be said of any fairy warrior. The real question is whether Conri will be a good addition to our company, and only Seren or Danu herself can answer that.”

“So, what say you, Princess?” Conri was still on one knee before me; watching me with steady eyes, their fire banked to embers.

“I say that I'm not one to be easily deceived,” I began.

“Oh, thank the mother,” Torquil said with relief.

“I know there are motives behind your actions that are perhaps not the most honorable,” I continued; ignoring Torquil again as Conri's expression hardened. “But I also know that they are not entirely dishonorable either.” Conri's eyes immediately flared back to bright hope as I smiled. “I think you have a wild heart but a true one, and I don't believe you would ever betray me

or it. I think you would sooner die."

Conri swallowed hard—rapidly blinking back the sudden shine over those burning eyes,—nd nodded.

"Go home to Fairy and wait with my Guard at the fairy mound." I reached down and took his hand with a firm grip so I could help him up. "When I return, you can lay your sword before me, and we'll see if Danu will bless it."

"And if she does?" Conri whispered.

"Then I will accept your offer." I grinned.

"Thank you, Your Highness." Conri bowed, gave me a brilliant smile, and then turned to bound off down the sidewalk.

"Well done," Tiernan said approvingly. "If Danu accepts him, none can gainsay his addition to the Star's Guard. If she does not, he can't hold it against you."

"Yep"—Abby nodded—"this is going into my blog."

"I... I don't..." Torquil stared off at Conri's withdrawing figure and then looked back at me in dismay. Finally, he set his eyes on Abby. "What is a blog?"

Chapter Thirty-Four

The next morning, I went downstairs and was told that my dad had left during the night. He'd gone back to Hawaii without me.

At first, I was upset that Tiernan's outing had taken me away from the Council House right when I needed to be there, but then I realized that my father must have been waiting for an opportunity to leave without having to see me. Which meant that he would have stayed out of sight until I left; no matter when that was. So, I guess it was best that he left when he did, and I didn't have to stick around for weeks while he avoided me.

We decided not to mention Brendan's little ambush to the Council. I didn't want to strain this new relationship I had with Councilman Murdock nor did I want Mini-Murdock causing any trouble for Abby. I was going back to Fairy, but Abby had to work in the same city as Brendan. Besides, I didn't think he'd try anything after his horrendous failure.

There was no reason to remain in HR (the Human Realm) after my father's cowardly retreat. Abby was the only one who still treated me normally. Everyone else was either too respectful, too suspicious, or—as in the case of Brendan and his friends—downright hostile. I had already met with the highest ranking council members and all of them had agreed to my continued employment as an extinguisher, but none of them knew what that would entail yet.

In the end, Torquil enchanted a crystal ball for them so they could contact me in the Fairy Realm when they did have a job for me. Crystal balls are used like telephones by the Fey. Well, more

than telephones I guess since you could see the person you were contacting. More like Skype. Using a crystal ball to make “a call” was called scrying and you could scry for anyone who also possessed an enchanted ball. You just needed to know their name. You could even leave messages in the crystal you contacted; a sort of hovering image which would remain until the other person cleared it away.

Out of all the Human Councils, only the High Council in Ireland had an enchanted crystal ball which was used to contact the fairy kingdoms only in the case of an emergency. That the San Francisco Council now had one of their own, which they could use to contact me whenever they wished, was enough of a prize to leave all of the council members beaming delightedly. They even gathered to wish us farewell.

It was on the way back to Gentry Technologies that the Unseelie attacked.

We were taken by surprise; our limo run off the road and into an alley so slim that we couldn't open the doors. Claws tore through the roof and the metal was peeled back like the lid of an anchovy tin. A very ugly woman peered through the jagged opening. Her face was pitted and deeply wrinkled, her cheeks hanging in long flaps around her chin, and her nose seemed to drip like melted wax over her mottled lips. She was skeleton skinny—her tattered clothes hanging limply on her—and her stringy hair was full of dirt, broken twigs, and gore. She laughed as a massive hand reached past her and grabbed me around the waist.

Tiernan and Torquil were already slicing at the leathery hand to no avail when I pulled my tiny iron dagger out of my boot and stabbed it between two bulbous and hairy knuckles. I'd left my iron sword back in Fairy because I didn't want to disturb my fairy escort by wearing it, but I'd hidden the dagger in my boot and now I was glad I had. A horrible shout shook the limo as the hand jerked out of the roof; leaking green fluid down its fingers. The hag above me cackled as if it were all a magnificent joke and then

she jumped into the car with us.

Three blades swung at her but although she appeared old, she was very nimble and dodged them all. As she seemed to dance and spin around our weapons, a bunch of bogles poured in through the roof. The little, wicked goblins climbed over Torquil and Tiernan like a wave of foul-smelling, bubbly-skinned, chubby-limbed munchkins; shrieking and stabbing with their little obsidian daggers.

I started stabbing into the mass of them, and they squealed; edging back far enough for Torquil and Tiernan to pull their steel daggers. The interior, although spacious for a limo, was just too small for swordplay. Before I could land another blow, I was grabbed from behind. I looked over to see that yet another hideous woman had climbed into the limo with us. I cut at her arms and backed away when her skin sizzled and she screamed; foaming green at the mouth.

The huge hand reached inside again and grabbed me once more. I stabbed it, but as I did, one of the hags snatched the dagger away from me. She yelped and dropped the iron immediately, but she'd given her compatriot enough time to yank me from the vehicle. I shouted and apportated the weapon. It flew up toward me, but I was jerked out of its path and it clattered down the crevice between the car and the alley wall.

The hand squeezed tighter, and I twisted around to face its owner. Then I froze. It was a redcap—basically a giant goblin—with long hair that was as greasy and black as crude oil. His eyes were flaming furnaces and his jaundiced skin was thicker than an elephant's hide. He was wearing homespun pants in rancid green, a pus-yellow tunic, and something which resembled a Greek fisherman's cap that was stuck low on his head. This cap, which Redcaps reportedly soaked in the blood of their victims, was dark brownish-red, crusty at the edges, and smelled of death.

I flailed; casting a hand toward him and setting his clothes

on fire. The scent of burning decay hit me, and he roared but his grip didn't slacken. Instead, he fell back; knocking metal dumpsters aside as he rolled in the muck. I found myself tossed along with him until the flames went out. The damn redcap knew about *stop, drop, and roll.*

I reached for the fairy magic inside me; desperate enough to try anything. A twinkling shiver crept through me but before I could do anything with it, the redcap knocked me on the head with his other fist and the world went black.

Chapter Thirty-Five

I woke up in a dark room; lying on a soft bed. I blinked and tried to rub the sleep from my eyes but a heavy weight held my wrists back. The clink of chains alerted me to the fact that I was bound to the bedposts; my arms stretched out to either side of me. My heart sped up as I tried to peer through the darkness. The slim wick of a candle caught fire and my gaze swung toward it. A beeswax taper set into a simple, silver holder was held by an elegant but masculine hand. The small circle of light revealed very little of the man beyond the hand; only a bit of arm and chest.

The flame flickered as the candle was brought forward and placed on the bedside table. Then, with a wave of the elegant hand, the whole room was illuminated. It seemed as if hundreds of candles had been lit but there was still only the one placed beside me. I blinked against the glare until I was able to focus. King Uisdean stood beside the bed, smiling softly.

"Greetings, Daughter of my Brother," he purred.

"Greetings, Crazy Motherfucker," I snarled back.

"I have never had relations with my mother," he mused. "Although, I may be convinced to sample another relative." His face lowered to mine, and I tried to headbutt him. Uisdean pulled back with a low laugh and his long fingers closed around my throat. "You are definitely of my blood; more so than your mewling father. It's a shame you're tainted with humanity."

"And it's a shame you're a perverted sociopath," I choked out.

His fingers tightened, and I gasped for air.

“You must learn to respect your superiors.” Uisdean lowered his face and pressed his cheek against mine as he breathed in deeply. “I can smell Catriona in you.” He pulled back and looked down the length of me. “I can see her in you. If not for that, I might find you attractive enough to fuck.” His fingers loosened as he stood. “Oh, well; we will find other ways for you to entertain me.”

His pin-straight, obsidian hair was tied back with a thick band of silver, and he was dressed in a black velvet tunic with black leather pants. The onyx of his eyes matched his dark ensemble but his skin made it all seem so startling. He was as pale in real life as he had been in my dream and all that black made him look like a ghost.

“All right.” I cleared my throat. “At least it's not to be rape. So, what then? You can't kill me now that I've been crowned.”

“Yes, yes.” He waved his hand airily. “You're protected by the throne, but other undesirable heirs have been handled in the past and so shall you be. First, though, royalty must be shown hospitality.” He motioned toward me and the manacles fell away from my wrists. “Attempt any violence, and I shall have you whipped in front of the entire court. Do you understand?”

I gave him a curt nod.

“Good.” Uisdean smiled sweetly and held out his arm to me. “You're surrounded by unseelie fey and would never make it out of my castle anyway. It would be best not to upset me.”

I slid off the bed and stared at his arm a second before I took it. Simply touching him made my skin crawl but what choice did I have? Uisdean escorted me to a door to the right of the bed and pushed it open before waving me through.

“There's a change of clothes and a bath waiting for you,” he said. “Make use of both and then I will send some guards to escort you to dinner.”

“Great!” I gave a fake, bright smile. “Thanks so much, Uncle Uisdean. What a wonderful host you are.”

Uisdean chuckled lowly and stroked a hand over my hair. “You have your father's eyes... almost. Just as you almost had his throne.” He turned and left through a door opposite the bed.

I slammed the bathroom door closed and then began to search for an exit or a weapon.

After ten minutes, I had searched the entire black marble room and come up with nothing. There were no windows or openings bigger than the toilet and there was nothing even resembling a weapon. I guess I could use the bottles of liquid soap as missiles but that would just be stupid. I could do more damage with my psychic gifts.

I gave up at last and bathed in the onyx tub. I swear; all that black was a bit of an overkill. I get it, you're Dark Fey, but would it kill you to have a little color in your castle? Damn fairies and their themes.

After the bath, I put on the black dress (big surprise, more black) that I found folded neatly on the counter and then some soft-soled, matching slippers. A full-length mirror in a silver frame was propped against the far wall like an afterthought, and I went to look over my funereal ensemble.

My reflection was paler than normal. Surrounded by all that darkness, my Irish skin looked almost as white as my Uncle's. The dress belled out around me, sleeves and skirt full; almost to the point of roundness. The waist nipped in, embroidered with silver thread, and the neckline was low; showing off cleavage which was a little too generous for the dress. I frowned. Did I really want to display these assets tonight? Nope, but I didn't have anything to cover them up with either.

I grimaced and walked out into the bedroom to search once more for a weapon. The unknown glow was gone; leaving only the

single candle to dispel the dark. So, I took it with me around the chilly room as I searched every nook and cranny for something sharp enough to poke my Uncle's eye out with. I don't care how much magic you have, a stab in the eye will stop you at least momentarily.

No luck. I sighed as a knock echoed through the chamber and then the door opened to reveal a fairy man. He strode in and waved his hand; bringing the light back even brighter than before. I blew out the candle, put it down, and looked him over.

He was dressed in cerulean silk. I was both shocked and a little relieved to see the vivid color. The man was as tall as Uisdean which meant he was taller than Keir and Tiernan both (pretty damn tall), and he had bluish-gray hair like the sky before a storm. His eyes were stormy too; with swirls of gray over the deep blue of his irises. His brows were sooty slashes over those turbulent eyes and his mouth mimicked the slash with a cruel line below the long slope of his nose. His skin was pale but not moonlight white.

“Hello, Cousin.” He grinned wickedly. He sounded a lot like Uisdean; that same sort of sinister nonchalance.

“And you are?” I fisted my hands and prepared for whatever he might do.

“Bress Thorn, Marquis of the Unseelie, son of your Aunt.” He bowed gallantly. “And your soon to be husband.”

“Excuse me?” My hands fell lankly to my sides. That was not at all what I'd been expecting.

“I should have been Uncle Keir's heir, but since you beat me to it”—he leaned against the door frame and looked me up and down; his gaze lingering in places with a very disturbing malice —“I shall have to gain the throne in another fashion.”

Bress straightened and then sauntered over to me; his wavy hair swishing behind him like an angry cloud. I stood my ground

despite the instinct that was telling me to *run, run, run*! He lifted a hand to my cheek, and I snatched it, twisted it, and used it to push him away from me. Bress stumbled, caught himself, and then stared back at me with wide, delighted eyes.

"Uncle Uisdean said you had spirit." Bress came forward again, completely unperturbed. "Thank the Goddess for that. I hate simpering women."

"Doesn't everyone?" I lifted a brow, and he let out a surprised bark of laughter.

"You are wonderful," he vowed in a low and breathy tone and then held an arm out to me. I took it as he continued, "I will relish every pain-filled moan I draw from you."

"Right back atcha, Cuz." I smiled viciously at him.

"Tomorrow, we'll be married, but I won't be waiting until then to claim my marital rights." Bress slid a nasty look my way as he led me out the door and down a shadowy stone passage.

The stone lining the hallway was smooth but only in the way that very old stone is smooth. Time and the constant slide of things against it had weathered it down so that there were no rough edges, but it was still pitted in a way that polished stone was not. There were things growing out of those divots and the crevices between the stones; moss, glowing lichen, and little pasty mushrooms which were probably poisonous. The place felt more like a cave than a castle.

"Yeah, that's what you think," I huffed and slid Bress a menacing look. "My teeth may not be as sharp as some, but I've got a strong jaw. I'll bite it off before I let it inside me."

"It will go so much better for you if you don't fight me"—Bress paused to grin at me—"too much."

"Um-hmm." I rolled my eyes but paused when I saw the

way the ceiling seemed to move.

I peered closer and shapes distinguished themselves from the shadows; eyes shining and teeth clicking. I had no idea what they were—some sort of fairy bat perhaps—but I decided I didn't want to know. I transferred my gaze behind me where two goblins —one with mottled greenish-gray skin and one with slick blue skin —trailed us like prison guards. They smiled at me; showing off sharp teeth with the remnants of their last meal caught within them. I smiled gaily back at them, wondering if the Fey knew about dental floss, and then focused my gaze forward. So far we'd taken a left and two rights. I filed that information away as we took one more left and entered a large room.

Here, at least, there was architecture better suited to a castle. The walls were polished onyx; glassy enough to cast reflections in and they soared up to a vaulted ceiling crisscrossed with dark wooden beams. The ground was slabs of malachite and the same green stone soared seamlessly up from the floor to form a line of flame-topped columns that ran down the longest sides of the room. At the far end there was a dais holding the high table and set before it were two lines of dining tables—one to either side of the room—placed parallel to the lines of columns. The tables were set end to end; forming two, long, continuous pieces. A very similar set up to that of the Twilight Castle but yet vastly different.

The sound hit me first. Screeches, growls, roars, and chitters. Then waves of foul scent washed over me as we passed goblins, bogles, hags, and slimy kelpies who had changed from their normal waterhorse forms into something that vaguely resembled human. They had thick, seaweed-green hair which dripped all over their dark clothes and strong teeth that looked better suited to their horse forms. They moved like beasts too; heads swinging low to get a better look at me while other members of the Court pushed past them.

Kelpies weren't that bad really. The most they were known to do was give a human a good dunking if you were foolish enough

to climb on their backs when they were in their horse forms. The Each-Uisge, which was another type of waterhorse, was far worse. If you had the misfortune of climbing on his back, you'd be fine as long as you stayed inland. Take the fairy anywhere near water though, and it would run straight for it where it would drown you and then tear you apart. Then it would eat you; everything but your liver, which it would leave behind. I guess Each-Uisge don't like paté.

I didn't see any Each-Uisge, though. I did see some beautiful bean sidhes who stared balefully at me with large, soulful eyes. Thankfully, they kept silent. Their cries foretold doom, and I was in dire enough straits without them adding to it. There were redcaps who hung back near the walls, out of the way of the smaller fey, and spriggans who could be small or very large depending on their mood. At the moment, most of them had chosen small.

Kappas—a type of Japanese fairy with bowl-shaped depressions in the top of their heads—darted through the legs of massive oni—a sort of Japanese ogre with wild hair and horns growing out of their heads. These particular oni were of the red-skinned variety, and the kappas, who ranged from green to yellow, showed up brightly against the crimson background of their buddies. The kappas, who were about the size of a six-year-old child, had metal caps on their heads to protect the water they needed to keep in those head-bowls all the time. A vulture swooped by one, and the kappa snapped at the bird with its own wide, turtle-like beak.

The vulture alighted in front of the kappa and transformed into a tall man with impressive, gray wings. He set his burning eyes on the little fairy and smoke began to drift from his fingers. The kappa let out a squeak and ran away; a hand protectively poised on the top of his cap. The vulture-man—who I determined to be a djinn—smoothed the lapels of his tailored suit and smiled with satisfaction. I looked away quickly; knowing better than to

catch his interest.

Black furred pukas roamed freely about, sniffing for scraps around the tables, and when one passed by me, I jerked away. It paused to growl a warning in my direction before moving on. Then a nuckelavee sauntered by, and I forgot all about the pukas. Outside the members of the Sluagh, the nuckelavee were the most horrifying things in the Fairy Realm. Technically, they were sea fairies and they were always a little wet, though not from water.

It was mostly horse-like in appearance. Although, its legs ended in flippers which smacked the stone floor like wet towels as it walked. It had one fiery eye in the center of its forehead, a mouth full of dagger sharp teeth, and no skin. That's right, it was skinless; its black blood showing clearly through custard-yellow veins which webbed over slick, crimson muscles and around snow-white sinews. But that wasn't even the worst of it. Rising from its back—attached at the waist—was the torso of a man. It had a featureless face on its bulbous head; a head which was so big that it rolled side-to-side as if its neck were too weak to support it. It had no legs. As I said, it was just a torso attached to the horse's waist, but it had arms so long that they almost dragged the ground. The nuckelavee shifted its one eye in my direction, and I shivered.

I'd seen most of these fairies before but some, like the nuckelavee, I'd only read about. Seeing them in the flesh—some with more flesh than others—was disconcerting, to say the least. A shellycoat goblin, with his layers of shells worn like armor over his chest, clattered by; shooting me a wide smile.

“Come now.” Bress angled me through the mass of lesser fey and over to the throng of sidhe near the dais.

One of the benefits of being sidhe was a better seat at dinner and the tables closest to the dais were reserved for them. It was a perfect example of the elitism Torquil had displayed, and it made me realize that no such segregation was shown in the Twilight Court. There, the Fey—both lesser and sidhe—had

mingled together and, despite Torquil's attitude, that mingling gave me hope. Perhaps the Twilight Sidhe would be more receptive to change than their Unseelie cousins.

As we headed forward, I peered up at the ceiling, where beautiful women with porcelain skin sat on the wooden cross beams. They swung their legs like children; smiling down at me sweetly. I watched as one of them stroked her long, talon-tipped fingers through her shining, blonde hair; arranging the curls carefully over her slight breasts. Then I glanced at the nuckelavee. So, that was why they were up in the rafters; the white women were afraid of horses. Although, honestly, who wouldn't be afraid of a nuckelavee?

The white women, also known as baobhan-sith, were the real inspiration behind tales of vampires. They lured men to them with their beauty and then attacked with those claws; puncturing a hole in the neck of their victims, which they would drink from. I knew about their fear of horses because I had studied the baobhan. I'd studied every fairy the humans knew of, and I'd also studied their weaknesses. So, I wouldn't let them scare me. I was an extinguisher, and I'd been trained to kill them. They could smile at me all they wanted, and I would simply smile back.

“Bring my niece here,” Uisdean called from his gigantic throne.

The throne was carved from obsidian and polished to look like glass. Uisdean sat in it casually; one arm draped over the table in front of him while he sipped from a goblet of wine. At least, I hoped it was wine. The wall behind him was covered in black, thorny, thick vines and hanging from them was a banner with a device embroidered on it, just like the one in the Twilight Castle. Except this device had a silver moon instead of a star and its background was completely black.

Bress led me up the steps to the long table, which only Uisdean and a woman were seated at. The woman set dark gray

eyes on me as if I were a mosquito to be slapped and brushed away. She was overly thin, almost to the point of emaciation, and her bone-white hair was piled in elaborate curls atop her head. Her skin was as pale as her hair and there was something about the shape of her eyes that reminded me of Keir. She held her hand out to Bress as we neared.

"Mother." Bress bowed over the woman's hand and kissed the air above her claw-like fingers.

"My son." She nodded as if pleased by the sight of him. Her voice was the barest breath of sound, as if it was too much effort for her to speak. "Set the half-breed down and come sit by me."

"Yes, Mother." Bress pulled out a chair on Uisdean's right, and I slid into it. Then he crossed behind Uisdean and the woman to sit on his mother's left.

I gave a sigh of relief.

"You prefer me to your betrothed?" Uisdean asked with a wry grin. "How surprising."

"He's my cousin, not my betrothed," I hissed, "and if you think you can force me to speak vows to him, you are sorely mistaken."

"We'll see." Uisdean smiled brightly and poured some wine into a crystal goblet in front of me. "Drink, it'll help relax you."

"No thanks." I smiled back at him. "I'm good."

"Not that good." Uisdean's face went malicious for a moment. "Moire may have given you a reprieve from Bress but as soon as the evening's pleasantries are over, you will be reunited, and it looks as if he's already anticipating the reunion." He cast a glance over at Bress, who was staring at me intensely.

“I'm sure we'll have lots of fun together.” I grinned brightly. “Hey, just for future reference, Bress isn't anyone's heir, is he?”

“What do you mean?” Uisdean narrowed his eyes on me.

“I just wanted to know if I could kill him without bringing the Sluagh down upon my head?” I twisted my lips into a smile. “But then again, I've dealt with the Sluagh before... twice. They're not so bad.”

As if everyone had been listening to my conversation, the entire hall went quiet and all eyes turned toward me. Not at all creepy. And I wasn't quite sure what had got their attention. Was it the fact that I had threatened Bress or that I'd faced the Sluagh and lived? I mean, didn't they already know that last bit?

“You sent the Sluagh after her?” Moire's breathy voice was loud in the silence.

Hmm, maybe they didn't know.

“I had no knowledge of the Sluagh hunting Princess Seren,” Uisdean's tone made the statement into a lie.

“Twice?” Bress asked; his eyes glittering.

“I imagine that if someone were able to injure the Sluagh, the Cursed Ones would make a second attempt to kill her,” Uisdean said airily.

“You *injured* the Sluagh?” Bress' eyes went wide as a slow smile spread across his face.

“And she lived,” Moire's voice went even softer; so soft that I had to strain to hear her. “Maybe she'll make you a good wife after all.”

“I told you she's lovely, Mother.” Bress looked at me as if I were a new toy he couldn't wait to play with.

“I'm not into incestuous relationships, but thanks for the compliment,” I said to Bress before refocusing on Uisdean. “So? Is he anyone's heir or not?”

“Not,” Uisdean finally answered. “But he is my favorite nephew and although you wouldn't be facing the Sluagh, you'd still have to deal with my wrath.”

“I think I already have to deal with that.” I shrugged, and he frowned.

“You will not be facing either Uncle Uisdean or the Sluagh, Princess Seren,” Bress leaned over to speak across his mother and his Uncle... *our* Uncle. “I am the only one you will be dealing with, and I welcome any challenge you may present me with, but I assure you; I will be the victor. By morning, you will be on your knees.”

“Only if I'm kneeling over your dead body.” I looked at Uisdean as I answered, and he frowned deeper.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The entertainments of the Unseelie Court would haunt me forever. Oh, they danced, drank, and made merry like they did in the Twilight Court, but in Unseelie, the merriment consisted of several rounds of rather inventive torture; inflicted on captured seelie fairies. Since the Fey were immortal, torture could continue almost endlessly; just so long as they gave their victims time to heal, and there were fairies there who had a blank, hopeless look to them that spoke of years of such treatment.

By the end of the night, I was staring into my lap, trying to drown out the sounds that seemed to echo in my ears, with the deep, tremulous breaths I was taking. My eyes were rapidly blinking back tears and my throat was constricted from holding down my screams. My skin ran hot and cold as if trying to decide whether to be terrified or furious. The smell of blood was an undertone to burnt flesh and hair, and I was a step away from throwing up all over their feast.

“There is no feast without cruelty,” Uisdean whispered into my ear.

“I don't think this was what Nietzsche meant when he said that,” I shot back; earning a surprised smile from him.

“Poetry.” He waved his hands expansively. “Just as I said in your dream; words can have so many meanings.”

“Nietzsche was a philosopher, not a poet,” I ground out.

“I think most philosophers have the souls of poets,” he countered, “but that is... what's the human expression? Next to the point?”

“*Beside* the point,” I ground out.

“Yes!” Uisdean smiled in delight. “Words again, so lovely. It is *beside* the point because Nietzsche *was* a poet and also a composer.”

“What?” I blinked; totally unprepared for this fairy to know more than I did about a human.

“I don't believe Nietzsche would be as offended by our feast as you are,” Uisdean mused. “I think he would agree with me when I say; you're letting your slave morality cloud your reason.”

“My *what*?!” I gaped at him.

“I apologize.” He blinked. “I thought you'd read Nietzsche.”

“I have.” I frowned and then remembered what he was referring to. “The master slave morality,” I gave a huff. “Right, but again, this is a bit extreme for that. Just because I don't want people tortured, it doesn't make me a slave moralist.”

“You're responding to our treatment of enemies we have under our control.” Uisdean cocked his head at me; not even flinching when a woman screamed in the background. “This, according to the human Nietzsche, is a slave morality, propagated by Christianity, which is a religion of the slaves. Master morality values pride, nobility, strength, and power. Good or bad are determined by the consequences of your actions. The end result. Slave morality values kindness, humility, and sympathy,” he said the words with a sneer. “Good and bad are determined by intention.”

“Yes, I know what you meant now.” I rolled my eyes. “No need for the philosophy lesson.”

“I merely point it out because I want to know why you seem to be aligning yourself with the slaves when you should

behave like a master." Uisdean looked genuinely interested.

"I'm neither," I growled. "I'm an American."

"It wasn't so long ago that Americans owned slaves," he pointed out.

"Yeah, all right, that's valid," I said. "But we don't anymore."

"Yes, because now America is a good Christian Nation"—he chuckled—"valuing humility and justice against oppression. Sacrifice for the greater good."

"First of all"—I turned to face him fully so I could point my finger in his face because that's what you do when you're annoyed with a fairy king—"we are a nation founded on the right of religious freedom, not only the right to be Christian."

"Freedom; another slave ideal." He laughed and batted away my finger as if it were a fly

"Are you kidding me?" I gaped at him. "As if you'd want to be enslaved?"

"I can never be enslaved," he said in a low, dangerous tone. "I am a *master*. I'm powerful, and I value that power. I value the consequences actions have; like how the Seelie will fear us more when they hear how their people screamed beneath our blades. How they will recoil from me and mine because of that fear. How my dark host and I will become the food of their nightmares. This, you naive child"—he waved a hand out at the torture—"is a king protecting his people, and you have no right to sit here and pass judgment on it."

"Wow," I whispered. "You actually believe this is justified. You think this is *noble*."

"Consequences." Uisdean nodded. "Slaves worry about

intentions, but *I* am a *king*. I must weigh the costs and make the hard decisions so that I can get the result I want. If you thought less like a slave and more like a queen, you would see it too. As much as I despise your human blood, you are half sidhe and that half is from a powerful line. You'd do well to claim that power instead of sitting here; whimpering about the way I use mine."

"I told you," I snapped, "I'm neither slave nor master. I value strength as well as kindness, power as well as humility, and intention as well as consequence."

"Impossible." He shook his head. "You cannot have it both ways."

"Is it impossible?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "Aren't you telling me that you *intend* to protect your people? I admit that I see that as good, but if you're honest with yourself as well as with me, you'll admit that you also enjoy this. That those screams are music for you and the blood pooling on your pretty floor is turning you on. That is not so good."

"Yes." Uisdean was suddenly cheek-to-cheek with me; his hand holding my face still so he could whisper in my ear. "I *am* enjoying this. The blood. The pain. The screams. It makes my own blood surge with excitement. It makes me feel strong and victorious, and I will probably spend the rest of the evening between the legs of several women to release my excitement. This is our way; the master morality. We know that pleasure is always good, especially if you find it along the path to a happy consequence. Now"—he pulled back so he could look into my eyes—"stop teasing me, little girl, or the legs I spread tonight shall be yours, and we'll find out just who is the master and who is the slave."

"You're sick," I whispered as he released me, "and an evil bastard."

"Words." Uisdean shrugged and smiled; carefree once

more.

“True words,” I muttered.

I was almost relieved when Bress came to escort me back to my room. I don't know how much more of Uisdean's witty repartee I could take.

As we left the hall, one of our goblin guards grabbed a tortured seelie woman from where she was cowering on the floor and dragged her along behind us. I was troubled and confused by her presence until I saw the large, wooden contraption that had been constructed in the middle of the bedroom while we were at dinner. Then I began to understand.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Bress took the fragile looking fairy from the goblin and lashed one of her wrists to each of the poles; poles which were set into a sturdy, bloodstained base. Once the fairy was handed off, the goblins left; closing the door behind them with smug, backward glances.

The seelie woman was completely nude; her clothing had been ripped away much earlier in the evening. She had pale, golden skin which had already been cut in numerous places by razor-sharp, obsidian blades. Her thin arms dangled pitifully from the thick ropes and her legs buckled beneath her. On her back was a pair of delicate wings; translucently shimmering peony pink and pea pod green. There were dark brown veins running through them, like dragonfly wings but thicker. One wing was broken and hanging uselessly at her side but the other flopped frantically as if it could carry her away all by itself. She turned huge, chartreuse, frightened eyes toward me, her identically-colored hair falling lankly around her face.

“I asked you what you're doing with that fairy?” I strode forward, and Bress backhanded me.

The attack took me by surprise so I ended up on the floor, but I wasn't there for long. I kicked out at his knee and then

jumped to my feet to face him.

Thunder rumbled through the room—shaking the stone beneath my feet—and I shot a surprised look around me as dark clouds gathered above us. Damn weather magic; I scowled up at the clouds. It was unpredictable and vicious. Which meant I needed to be the same to combat it.

I charged Bress before he could do anything with that burgeoning storm; knocking him to the ground. With my knees digging into his thighs, I began to punch him over and over. It was going pretty well until a lightning bolt hit me in the chest and sent me reeling back.

While my body stiffened and shook through the jolts of electricity coursing through it, Bress picked me up and threw me on the bed. I was helpless to stop him as he closed the manacles around my wrists and when I did recover, I was locked up tight. He undid his belt and then pulled off his beautiful blue tunic so that he stood there clad only in pants. His chest was perfect, as well-muscled as any model's, but it disgusted me. He disgusted me. That disgust increased as I watched him pull a whip from the chest at the foot of the bed. He began to use it expertly on the poor fairy woman.

“Stop!” I screamed at him. “What do you want? Just tell me what you want and stop hurting her.”

“Oh, sweet Seren.” Bress smiled and wiped the blood from his lips. “You'd best get used to this. This is the only way to arouse me enough to perform. I normally torture my lovers first but since you're heir to a fairy throne, and I can't kill you, I'd rather not take the chance. So, this fairy will take your place, and you will be spared most of my brutality. You should be grateful.”

“Grateful?” I gaped at him.

“Yes.” He narrowed his eyes at the fairy again. “Grateful. Good little children are grateful.” He lifted the whip and brought it

down on the fairy's back. Another lash and he paused to close his eyes and shiver. “Good sons do what their mothers tell them to and ask no questions. Isn't that right, Mother?!” He shouted suddenly. “I have to be strong and cruel and devious and GRATEFUL!” He brought the whip down hard, and the fairy screamed.

I watched Bress spiral out of control and his magic followed suit; condensing into a distressing mass of thunderclouds which roiled across the ceiling, sparking and rumbling like an angry beast. Bress shouted more insanity about his mother, his voice melding with that of the swelling storm, and I prayed silently for help. *Tell me what to do. Please, God... Goddess, anyone, help me stop him. Help me save us.* Then, suddenly, it came to me; an understanding as if I'd known Bress for all of my life. I knew why he was so angry, what had created the madness and violence in him... and what would quiet the storm.

“My son,” I called in a breathy whisper, and Bress froze; the whip dropping from his startled grip as his whole body tensed. “Come here.”

“Mother,” he whispered and closed his eyes tightly. “I hate you so much.”

“Why do you hate me?” I asked as the beaten fairy looked over her shoulder at me in shock... and hope.

“You made me like this!” He turned and yelled at me; thunder punctuating his words. “You made me into a monster who has to taste blood before he can taste pleasure. Do you think I wanted to be this way? Why did you make me do those things? Why couldn't you just love me as I was? I'm your son. Not just his but also yours. I am not my father.”

“I do love you, Bress,” I whispered. “You don't have to do this anymore. Come here and let me hold you.”

“Mother?” He looked straight into my eyes, but I knew he saw her; Moire. I could feel magic shimmering along my skin. I

wondered if I really did look like Moire in that moment.

Dismal, charcoal-black clouds paled to kitten gray and then trailed off into misty fingers. Thunder echoed its last cries as lightning sizzled out like a snuffed candle. The scent of moisture and electricity was blown away by a fresh breeze.

“What have I done?” Bress rushed over and undid the manacles. “Forgive me, Mother. I don't know why I chained you.”

“No, Bress.” I held my arms out to him. “Forgive me, my sweet boy. I've made so many mistakes. I wanted to make you strong enough to survive our family but now I see that I hurt you; crushed the real you beneath my feet. No mother should do that to her child.”

“Mother,” he cried and fell into my lap. “Mother, I didn't mean it. I don't hate you; I love you.”

“I love you too,” I crooned and stroked the hair back from his abused face.

Bress' jaw and the corner of his eye was bruised from my earlier attack and there was still a hint of blood on his lips. It gave me a very satisfied feeling, but I pushed that aside so I could continue impersonating Moire.

“Just relax, sweetheart.” I drew my fingers across his eyes instinctively and felt my magic gather. Stardust fell from my fingertips and drifted over his tumultuous eyes. The lavender dust sank into his irises—sparking once as they settled the storm—and then faded away.

“Seren?” Bress blinked, sat up, and then stared at me calmly. Sanely.

“Bress?” I asked carefully.

“What is this feeling?” He frowned and rubbed his temples.

“It's strange.”

“He's fairy-struck,” the seelie woman called over to me. “You have him in thrall, Princess. He will obey you; just speak your commands.”

“He will?” I looked back at Bress, who was staring at me with a peaceful expression. “You will?”

“Will what, Seren?” He smiled softly.

“You will help us escape the Unseelie Court,” I ordered. “Her and me.” I waved a hand at the tortured fairy. “And you will see us safely to the Twilight Court.”

“Of course, I will.” Bress got to his feet immediately and held a hand out to me. “We must get you two free of this place. Come!” He threw open the chest and pulled out two cloaks. “Put this on.” He handed me one and then went to the seelie woman.

Bress carefully undid her bonds and caught her when she nearly fell. Gently, he wrapped the cloak around her; angling her wings down her back. Then he lifted her over his shoulder. She whimpered even with his careful movements but then settled against him. I just gaped at Bress as he went to the door, peered out into the hall, and then motioned me forward.

Holy fairy cow, it was working!

“*Now*, Your Highness!” Bress urged me forward, and I hurried after him.

Bress took us swiftly down a few hallways, pulling back into the shadows every so often when another fairy would walk by. Then we slunk down some stairs and emerged in a stone room. I peered around it nervously. It seemed to be carved from the mountain itself, with corridors branching off in three directions; one to either side of us and one directly across. I could hear muted conversations coming from the side corridors as well as other

sounds I didn't want to interpret, but Bress led us forward.

The corridor soon became a tunnel and it branched off in several places, but Bress seemed sure of his path, and I continued to follow him through the maze of passages until he eventually led me out onto a moonlit field. I stepped out into the thick grass, took a deep breath of the fresh air, and sighed in relief.

“Wait here, and I'll fetch us a carriage.” Bress put the seelie woman down carefully and then ran off.

“Should we trust him or run?” I asked the woman.

“Oh, he'll return as promised.” She smiled with her swollen lips as I helped her sit up and then leaned her against my chest. “You're the Twilight Princess aren't you? Only the Twilight King has the ability to render another fairy fairy-struck.”

“You're talking about how fairies can cast an enchantment over humans and make them behave like idiots?” I asked.

“Among other things.” She nodded. “Any sidhe can work that kind of magic on a human but to cast it on a fellow fairy is impossible for all but King Keir. So, you must be the new princess, his half-human daughter.”

“I am.” I waved it aside. “Tell me more about this magic. You're sure that we can trust it to keep Bress on our side?”

“Yes,” she said gravely. “He will stay under your enchantment until you release him. The magic is called star-crossing and those under its sway are the starry-eyed. It's one of the few magics which can only be undone by the caster.”

“Very witty; starry-eyed.” I chuckled, and she moaned as I accidentally shifted her. “Oh, crap; I'm sorry. What's your name, anyway? I'm Seren.”

“I know who you are, Your Highness.” She smiled bravely

at me. “All of the courts have heard about your homecoming. I am Nighean of the Seelie, and I'm in your debt.”

“Nah, I'm an extinguisher,” I said casually. “We're supposed to protect the peace and save the innocent. It's literally in my job description.”

And I suddenly knew how I'd help the Council... by helping the Fey right there in Fairy. If the Fey were safe here, they wouldn't venture into the Human Realm to cause mischief. Torquil hadn't left in centuries so if all the Fey were as content as he, wouldn't it be the same for them?

“So, that's true as well.” Her eyes fluttered closed. “I'm in good hands then.”

“Nighean?” I felt for the pulse at her neck and it was steady so I relaxed.

She'd be okay, we just had to get her somewhere safe so she could heal. The pounding of hooves vibrating through the earth brought my head up. Then I shook it in amazement when I saw Bress—still bare-chested—driving a carriage straight toward us.

“Thank you,” I whispered into the air and a shiver coasted over my skin; a sign that I was starting to recognize as the presence of something divine. “Thank you, Danu,” I said more firmly, and the feeling intensified; rising inside me until it burst free in a wave of laughter. Who would have thought? When God finally answered my prayers, it was because he was a woman.

Bress pulled the horses to a stop right before us and then jumped down to help Nighean into the carriage. I stood up and put my hands on my hips; watching it all with a smirk.

“Well, damn,” I huffed, “I really am a fairy.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

We rode for hours; Bress driving the team of horses as I huddled inside the carriage, cradling Nighean as carefully as I could so she wouldn't be jostled too much. I'd given Bress my cloak since it was cold out, and I felt bad for not making him put his tunic back on before we left. I was warm enough inside the carriage anyway.

Then a wave of magic gave me the chills, and I looked out the window to see packed-earth walls surrounding us. The dark intensified into a void, but Bress kept his rapid pace. I suddenly realized where we were; inside a large fairy mound. Was he taking us into the Human Realm first? Why?

The passage brightened and then we were riding out into another forest. This one felt familiar, and I knew it was the Twilight Forest. What the hell? I hung my head out the window so I could shout to Bress.

“Did we just go through a fairy mound?”

“Yes,” he called back. “The road between Unseelie and Twilight.”

Right; the paths between the kingdoms. I'd forgotten about those. We were now in Twilight, but we literally weren't out of the woods yet. So, I pulled my head back inside and began to pray to Danu for our safe passage; that we'd make it all the way to the Twilight Court before Uisdean realized that I was gone. I don't know if she heard me, there was no answering tickle of magic, but a few hours later, just as dawn was lighting the sky and the power of the in-between was filling me, the Twilight Castle came into view.

I nearly cried in relief as Bress brought us right up to the gates, but then the Twilight guards started shouting down at Bress aggressively, and I had to lay Nighean down so I could jump out and explain.

“He's with me!” I called up to them as I rushed forward and laid my hand on the gate. It shimmered away to reveal a courtyard full of Twilight warriors.

Bress drove the carriage through the gates and then the bars reformed behind us and a shimmering curtain of magic fell. I climbed back into the carriage as Bress got down from his seat in a daze.

“Bress!” I called, and he rushed over to me. “Take her.” I put Nighean gently in his arms and then jumped down beside him. Before I could say anything to the knights around me, I was bowled over by a peppy puka. “Cat!” I laughed and ruffled her fur. “Did you miss me?” She yipped happily and licked my face with her sandpaper tongue. “I missed you too.”

“She was inconsolable... as was I,” Tiernan's voice came from somewhere above me, and I pushed Cat gently away so I could see him. His face was strained from a lack of sleep and his eyes were shadowed with worry. They cleared when they met my stare, and I gave him a small smile.

“And I.” Keir pulled me to my feet and into a hug. “Seren, I've never been so terrified. How did you manage to escape Uisdean?”

“With his help.” I jerked my thumb toward Bress, who was still holding Nighean. With his wounded face, bare chest, flowing cape, and armful of damsel in distress, Bress looked as if he belonged on the cover of a romance novel.

“Bress?” Keir gaped at his nephew. “Are you...?” He turned and looked at me with wide eyes. “You struck him?”

“A few times. With fists and magic.” I shrugged and saw Torquil edge around Tiernan. “Hey, blue fairy. It's good to see your face. I was worried about you guys.”

“I failed you, Princess Seren.” Torquil hung his head and dropped to his knees. “I beg your forgiveness.”

“*We* failed.” Tiernan's jaw clenched as he set his stare on me. “Please forgive us, Your Highness.”

“Guys, come on.” I grabbed Torquil's shoulder and yanked on it until he stood up. “I was there remember? There was no way to win against them. You did your best, but we were outmanned and outgunned. You can't win every battle. I'm just happy to see that you're okay. No one failed me.”

“Your Highness is too forgiving.” Torquil swallowed roughly. “I will endeavor to be worthy of your kindness.”

“She is quite reasonable, I think,” Keir decreed to everyone's surprise. “You both performed as best you could. If a Lord of the Wild Hunt was defeated, then the challenge was too great for two knights alone. Sometimes, our enemy wins the day, but Twilight will always prevail in the end.” The soldiers filling the courtyard shouted in agreement and then Keir turned back to me. “We were just arming ourselves to ride to the Unseelie Court and obtain your freedom.” He shook his head with a smile. “But it looks as if you've freed yourself. You are definitely your mother's daughter.”

“And my father's,” I added in a low voice. “I'm told you're the only other fairy with star-crossing magic.”

“I am.” Keir ran his palm over my cheek. “I'm so glad it has manifested within you.”

“It was damn good timing,” I agreed.

“Seren?” Bress asked; looking confused. “What do I do

now?"

"We're going to take Nighean inside in just a minute. Hold on, Bress," I said gently.

"Okay, Seren." He smiled at me complacently.

"Sweet Danu," Keir breathed as he looked over Bress. "You did a hell of a job for your first time. He's as starry-eyed as they get."

"Yeah, I guess I know what I can do with my magic now," I said as I absently stroked Cat's head.

"This is only the beginning, Seren," Keir said with a wry look.

"Oh?" I blinked. "What else is coming?"

"Only Danu knows," he said with an amazed tone.

"Great." I sighed. "Well, in that case, can we get Nighean inside? She's hurt pretty bad."

"Nighean?" Keir frowned, and I made a motion toward the bundle Bress was carrying. Keir went forward and pushed back the hood around Nighean's face. "Fetch a healer!" He shouted as he ushered Bress inside. "Seren, why do you have an injured sylph with you?"

"You don't want to know, Dad," I said grimly, "but I'll tell you anyway. Let's just get her taken care of first."

"All right, Daughter." Keir kissed my cheek, and we all went into the castle.

I began to follow Keir through a door on the right side of the entrance hall but before I made it through, Tiernan stopped me and pulled me off to the side.

“Seren,” he whispered a second before he set his mouth over mine.

I slid my hands around Tiernan's neck and sank into his kiss; relief, happiness, and excitement pooling inside me. I'd worried about Tiernan during my entire night in unseelie hell and seeing him whole and alive was another answered prayer. I was racking up quite a tab with this fairy goddess.

“I'm so glad you're all right,” I whispered when he pulled away. “I thought they might have killed you.”

“I'm a Lord of the Wild Hunt,” he reminded me... again. “I'm not so easy to kill. Although, they almost managed to kill Torquil. Once they had you, they gave up on us and left. I was able to carry him into Fairy and get us home.”

“Good job, my Lord Shadowcall.” I traced a finger over his shimmering scar and then my eyes fell on the statue behind him. “Oh, damn.” I pressed my hand to his cheek. “My grandmother is the Seelie Queen.”

“Yes.” He blinked in confusion.

“She's the queen who gave you this scar, isn't she?” I whispered.

“Yes,” his voice lowered as well.

“I can't believe I didn't realize it sooner,” I groaned.

“It doesn't matter.” Tiernan shrugged.

“How does it not matter?” I gaped at him. “My grandmother hurt you. She tried to *kill* you.”

“And your father gave me a new life.” He smiled gently. “Neither action has anything to do with you.”

“I kind of hate her now,” I mused as I began to trace the

scar again. “Even though I like the scar.”

“Seren.” Tiernan caught my hand. “I was scared. I've never felt anything like that, not even when I was cast out of Seelie.”

“Me too,” I teased. “I saw a nuckelavee.”

“You know what I'm trying to say.” He rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Yeah. I dig you too, Legolas.” I grinned.

“Really, Twilight Princess?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “You wanna go there?”

“I'll go anywhere as long as you come with me,” I purred and was rewarded with another toe-curling kiss.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“Dad?” I asked as I sat beside Nighean's bed, waiting for her to wake up.

“Yes?” Keir smiled at me.

It was getting easier and easier to call him *Dad*, which seemed to delight him to no end.

“Do you remember the night I made the cloud appear?” I was staring thoughtfully at Bress, who was seated across Nighean's bed from me; staring at me as if not only was I his entire existence but he was perfectly happy with that.

“Yes, of course.” Keir frowned. “The night before you were crowned.”

“Is this what I did to our fairies?” I waved a hand at Bress.

“I...” my father's face fell. “Not this exactly. To achieve this kind of result, you have to pour stardust directly into your victim's eyes, but it's possible that you cast a version of it. Something less...”

“Consuming?” I asked.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Less consuming. I don't have that ability, but magic always changes a bit in the transfer. Perhaps you're able to spread out the spell to affect an entire room full of fairies.”

“Or perhaps it was a fluke,” I offered. “I wasn't in control, it just happened. It could have been the result of its initial manifestation.”

“Or, it could be nothing.” He smiled but it looked strained. “It could have just been a bit of visual fluff.”

“But you don't believe that,” I stated as if it was fact.

“No,” he admitted.

“So, that's why they like me.” I sighed.

“That's not true,” he said, but I could see the worry in his eyes.

“How do I undo it?”

“You just wish it so,” he said simply. “Seren, if you did cast some magic that night, it was a light enchantment.”

“Maybe it was diluted since there were so many of them,” I mused.

“That sounds reasonable,” he agreed.

“Why do I get the feeling that you don't want me to remove the spell?” I lifted a brow, and Cat's head also lifted from where she'd been resting beside me; almost as if she sensed my agitation.

“You're my daughter,” Keir said firmly, “and they are my people. I want them to love you as much as I do.”

“Even if it's not real?”

“I guess not.” He sat back with a huff of breath.

“You're so old and yet sometimes, you act like a child.” I laughed.

“I guess it's a way for us Fey to deal with eternity. We try to stay young in our hearts as well as our appearance.” Keir shot a look at Bress. “Some of us retain quite a lot of childish aspects.”

“What should I do about him?” I nodded toward Bress.

“Well, if the situation were reversed, he'd keep you this way forever,” Keir pointed out.

“But it isn't reversed, and I think you may have just answered my question.” I looked at Bress and sighed. “I'm not a master or a slave.”

“What's that?” Keir asked.

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Just me figuring out my morality.”

“We are neutral,” he said simply. “Our morality is whatever it needs to be to keep the peace.”

I blinked and then smiled suddenly at him. “You're right.” I gave a little laugh. “I have a twilight morality; intention *and* consequence. We need them both.”

I looked over at Bress again. It would be so easy to keep him submissive and not have to worry about him but, in the end, I was an extinguisher, which is basically an officer of the law, and it just didn't feel legal to leave Bress as he was. No matter what the consequences. In this instance, intention won over consequence.

“We could always kill him,” Keir said softly, surprising me.

“You'd be okay with me killing your nephew?” I lifted a brow.

“No.” He took a deep breath. “But we may come to regret allowing him to live.”

“He's messed up.” I waved a hand at my temple. “In the head. I think your sister did some horrible things to him.”

“I'm sure you're right.” Keir cast a long look at Bress. “But I'm not sure there's any way to undo the damage.”

“Humans have ways of healing the mind,” I offered.

“You wish to put him in therapy?” Keir gave a surprised chuckle.

“I don't know.” I pondered Bress; his face was so peaceful, his deep blue eyes completely clear, without a trace of storm clouds. I knew it was magic but it still felt as if it were a glimpse of the man he could become. “Either way, I can't leave him like this.”

“At least let us put him in chains before you free him,” Keir said reasonably.

“And then what?” I narrowed my eyes at him. “Will you release him or keep him imprisoned?”

“I would be within my rights to hold him as prisoner since that's exactly what he intended to do with you,” Keir was still sounding reasonable, but I didn't like it.

“No; he was going to rape and then marry me,” I said and sighed. “In that order.”

“What?!” Keir launched to his feet, and Cat barked excitedly, waking Nighean.

“Dad, sit down,” I chided as I leaned over Nighean. “Hey, girl, how you feeling?”

She was laid face-down on the bed so her wings could heal. A pillow huddled under her chest and another beneath her cheek. Her head was angled toward me so she wouldn't have to see Bress.

“I'm feeling well, Your Highness.” Nighean smiled and fluttered her wings. The broken one was already mobile. Then she saw Keir and gave him a respectful nod. “Your Majesty, thank you for your aid and hospitality.”

“You're very welcome, and you're very welcome here, Lady Nighean,” Keir said gently. “Take as long as you need to

heal."

"Thank you," she whispered and then a tear trailed down her cheek.

"Hey now, you're safe, I promise." I laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I know." She took a deep breath. "It's just the thought of home seems unreal to me. I've been a prisoner of the Unseelie for so longthat I'd thought I'd never see the Court of Light again."

"How long were you there?" Keir was getting angry again and this time, I was joining him.

"Twenty-two years," she whispered. "I think. After awhile it all just blended together."

"That's almost as long as I've been alive." I stared at her, stunned.

"What's your family name?" Keir leaned forward and laid his hand on her cheek.

"Silvereed." She blinked up at him.

"And the first name of your closest relative?" Keir asked.

"Neala, my mother," she whispered.

"I will go immediately and scry for your mother, Nighean Silvereed." Keir stroked her cheek gently. "Sleep now and maybe by the time you wake, she'll be here."

"Thank you, King Keir." She closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

"Seren," Keir's voice went immediately terse, and he motioned for me to follow him. We slipped out into the hallway and then he turned to face me. "Now, tell me again what Bress had

planned for you?"

"I don't think it was Bress' plan," I said quietly. "I think Uisdean put him up to it."

"But Bress wants my throne, and he agreed to it," Keir shot an angry look back into the room to where Bress still waited.

"How could he have been your heir?" It suddenly occurred to me that Bress was unseelie and my father's throne was twilight.

"Bress is a twilight fairy," Keir said grimly. "His father is a seelie noble."

"Oh, that explains a lot." I recalled Bress' ramblings.

"His father was imprisoned in the Unseelie Court for awhile." Keir looked uncomfortable.

"Imprisoned?" I blinked. "Are you saying that Bress' mother had an affair with one of their prisoners?"

"Not an affair," Keir said and sighed. "He wasn't exactly willing."

"She raped him?!" I nearly shouted and then lowered my voice immediately. "Wow, that woman is psycho. No wonder Bress is so messed up."

"Messed up or not." Keir's expression hardened, "Bress is responsible for his own actions."

"Yes, I know," I said.

I owed Bress nothing, and I had no idea why the thought of imprisoning him didn't sit right with me. Maybe it was the family thing. Although, that sure didn't stop him from wanting to hurt me... in rather disgusting ways.

"Then you either keep him as he is or you free him from

enchantment, and I shall imprison him in our dungeon," Keir decreed in a voice that clearly said there would be no compromising.

"All right." I sighed and looked over at Bress. "Let me think about it."

"You do that." Keir nodded and turned to leave. "I'm going to contact Nighean's family."

"Dad?"

"Yes?" He looked back over his shoulder at me.

"I'm telling our fairies about the spell tonight." I saw his shoulders tense. "I don't want to start this life with a lie."

"All right, Seren. It's your decision," he said and walked away.

"I just hope they don't feed me to a dragon afterward," I mumbled as I walked back into the room. "I'm pretty sure that's what happens to princesses who piss off their fairies."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

That night, I stood on the dais in the dining hall and addressed the Twilight Fey. Keir remained seated behind the high table and allowed me to do the talking, but Cat was standing loyally beside me; looking ready to hurt anyone who reacted badly to my speech. I gave her a quick head pat to try and keep her calm, but I was pretty sure she was reacting to my nerves so it didn't do any good.

“You have all been so welcoming to me,” I started. “You've made me feel as if I'm one of you, even though I know some of you were unsure of me in the beginning.” I saw some of the fairies exchange confused glances. “You had good reason to be concerned. I'm only half fairy and although most of you are halflings as well, I'm well aware that it makes a difference when one of the halves is human.”

Cat whined and leaned against my side; causing me to steady my stance.

“I was born with great psychic gifts and was taught very early on how to control them,” I went on. “Not so with my fairy magic. I've only just begun to delve into its power and intricacies. I have no idea what it's capable of or how to go about using it. It was only when I was being held by the Unseelie that my magic revealed a piece of itself to me, and the Goddess helped me to understand it enough to use it.”

A murmur went through the Fey, but I held up my hand and they quieted.

“I know you've all been told that I've escaped the Unseelie Court by star-crossing Lord Bress.” I waved a hand to indicate

Bress, who was sitting at the high table with us since he was a royal and family to boot. I guess the Fey didn't have a separate table for royal traitors. “I have the ability to enchant fairies, to render a fairy fairy-struck, but I didn't have control of this ability until I used it on my cousin. I have since realized, after the magic was explained to me, that I may have unintentionally used it upon all of you.” The Fey went still as I continued. “I'm not certain, but I believe I've laid a light enchantment upon this court, and I would not have wished to gain your respect in such an underhanded way. So, I'd like to ask for your forgiveness and, hopefully, your understanding. This is all new to me, *you* are all new to me, but I value you already, and I don't want to begin our relationship with pretense.”

I held my arms out to them and wished for their freedom. I asked my magic to let them go if they were truly under my spell. A shimmer, like a heat wave, pulsed out from me and ran over the Court. They swayed with it; several of them blinking or shaking their heads like damp dogs. Then they all settled their eyes on me, and I felt the weight of several accusing glares.

But those stares were in the minority.

I was relieved and surprised to find that most of the Twilight fairies looked at me the same as they had before; some even smiling or nodding their heads in approval. I exhaled the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding and confronted those few harsh glares. I nodded to them; accepting their anger as well. We all must take responsibility for our actions, even when they're done unknowingly. Hadn't that point just been driven home to me by my father?

“You have every right to think poorly of me,” I spoke into the silence. “A fairy princess should have full control of her magic. All I can do is make you a promise that I will not stop until I've learned everything I can about my magic and have mastered it so that I can be the leader you deserve. Until then, I'm asking for your help and your patience because I can't do this without you, but at

the same time, I know that with you beside me, we can become the strongest court in all of Fairy!"

The Twilight Fey cheered. Even those who had been staring at me harshly dropped their anger for the moment. Flower petals rained down on me, and I looked up to see the pixies shaking the vines above my head. I smiled and caught a pure white petal in my hand, and then I instinctively cast the petal out. It spun and twisted in the air, sparkling and growing, morphing in shape until it was a bright star that hung high above the Court. Then it burst apart into thousands of tiny pieces and drifted down over the Twilight Fey.

It was a lovely bit of magic, and the Fey seemed to take it as a good omen; cheering and clapping even louder. Hooves stamped the stone floor and howls lifted from wild throats, but I only smiled vaguely as I stared pensively at the sparks that drifted down like snowflakes.

What good was that? If I had to defend myself against my uncle again, I needed more than a light show to do it. The star-crossing magic was great, but I had a feeling that Uisdean wasn't going to sit still and let me sprinkle stardust in his eyes. I'd need a more aggressive magic, something to hurt and possibly kill, if I wanted to survive my new family.

Then again, maybe that was just the extinguisher in me. I looked over the fairies, *my* fairies, and one burning gaze caught my attention. Right; there was something else that needed to be taken care of.

"While I have you all in thrall," I joked and actually received a light twittering of laughter. "I need to ask you to witness one more deed for me tonight. Lord Conri?"

Conri stepped forward; earning interested looks from the assemblage. He came right to the edge of the dais, and I went down to the lowest step. Still, he was a little taller than me. I

smiled when I saw his nervous expression.

“It's going to be all right,” I whispered to him.

“Not if she rejects me.” His eyes slid to the side. “A rejection will hurt the lesser fey, not just myself.”

“Maybe you should have a little more faith in Danu.” I laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Maybe I should have a little more faith in you,” he whispered and pulled his sword free with a determined movement.

The Twilight Fey gasped and several stood up in shocked affront. My Star's Guard came rushing forward, all but Torquil and Tiernan, who knew exactly what this was about. Conri knelt as I held a hand up to calm my knights.

“Lord Conri has asked to join the Star's Guard,” I said and a murmuring began to go through the crowd. “I've told him that Danu herself chose my guard members, and if he would allow her to judge him, I would abide by her decision.”

The murmurs grew in volume and more fairies stood so they could get a better look at Conri. Some of the voices lifted in anger and others in support. Several fairies simply watched intently, carefully remaining neutral.

“Will the rest of my Star's Guard come forward and witness Danu's judgment with me?” I glanced to the side, where Torquil sat and then behind me, where Tiernan was sitting at the high table.

They both immediately got to their feet and joined my Guard, who were spreading out behind Conri in a half circle. Tiernan took a spot on the end to my left and Torquil went to the right. The entire Star's Guard stared at me confidently, even Torquil, and I smiled at that, at them, before I looked back at Conri. The bargest laid his sword gently on the floor between us.

“I offer my sword and heart to you, Princess Seren,” Conri said in a strong voice. “My sword to strike down all who would oppose you and my heart to prove that my loyalty is for you above all others.”

I felt the magic of Danu's touch instantly and tears filled my eyes as her affection for Conri overwhelmed me. This was yet another step which she had somehow managed to lead me into taking. Conri hadn't chosen this at all, *she* had, and although her love for him was strong, it was about more than that. More than him.

“My children,” I spoke with her voice, and the hall went deathly quiet. “I love you all dearly but there are pieces of you which deeply sadden me. You sidhe are truly glorious—I made you to be so—but your glory does not make you more special to me than my other children. There are no lessers here!” Her voice whipped out through the room, and everyone fell to their knees. “No more shall you call your brothers and sisters lesser, for there is nothing less about them.” I set my eyes on Conri and smiled when I saw the tears streaming down his face. I leaned down and kissed his cheek. “I will never reject you.”

Then I stood, gasped, and swayed as Danu left; allowing me to complete the ritual of welcoming my new guardsman by myself. Conri's hand shot out to steady me, and I took it as if he were merely helping me down that last step. I gave him a quick wink before I bent to pick up his sword. Danu's magic rushed through me immediately; infusing his sword with a brilliant light.

“For your sword—so nobly pledged to me.” I held the weapon aloft, and the Twilight Fey sighed. “I give the blessing of victory, that it shall never fail you.” I lowered the sword between us so that the tip just grazed the ground before Conri. “For your love—eternal and unconditional—I offer you mine in return. You will not face my enemies for me but beside me. We will stand together, and I will guard you as you guard me, value you as you value me, fight for your needs as you fight for mine. Will you

stand with me?"

"I will!" Conri's voice rang out strong and sure.

"Then rise, *Sir* Conri"—I smiled as his eyes widened, and the court gasped—"and take back your sword."

Conri stood and took the sword from my hands as the room erupted into cheering.

Chapter Forty

After the Star's Guard welcomed their new brother into the fold, the Twilight Fey surrounded Conri to do the same. Then toasts were made to the new knight. Even King Keir came down to wish Sir Conri well and add his approval to Danu's decision but, eventually, the Court calmed and my father escorted me back to the high table.

“I've never seen anything so beautiful as you speaking with the voice of Danu,” he said proudly. “I will carry that memory with me forever.”

“So will they, I hope.” I looked out over the crowd and knew that they would. Attitudes would alter. Prejudice would depart. The Fey may be stuck in their ways but they always listened when Danu spoke to them. The lessers would be considered less no longer.

I believe they will,” Keir echoed my thoughts. “Now, what have you decided for Bress?”

“I imagine this existence would be more pleasant than that in a dungeon,” I said and cast a look at my cousin.

Bress looked lost; staring out at the court as if he wasn't sure where he was or what he should be doing. Kind of like watching a young Alzheimer's patient. Tiernan sat between us; casting side glances at Bress that spoke clearly of what he thought of my cousin. Which is why his next words surprised me.

“Are you trying to torture him?” Tiernan slid a glance my way. “I understand if you are, but I admit that I'm a little shocked.”

“What? No, of course not.” I looked across him at Bress, but I couldn't see anything wrong with the fairy.

“I don't think she understands how fully she's in control of him,” Keir said.

“What do you mean?” I looked back and forth between them.

Other than myself, there were only men at the high table, and I secretly wished Aideen hadn't gone back to her tree. I understood that she needed to reconnect with her magic, but I would have liked to have some female support... and some of her brutal honesty. She could be unintentionally harsh but at least she didn't pussyfoot around anything like these two were doing.

“When humans are fairy-struck, they sit just like this,” Tiernan explained. “They will do nothing without being commanded by the fairy who struck them. Most will waste away because they won't even feed themselves.”

“You're saying that Bress hasn't eaten because I didn't tell him to?” I asked in a horrified voice.

“Yes, precisely.” Keir nodded.

“Son of a bean-sidhe,” I swore in a low tone. “Why didn't someone tell me?”

“We assumed you knew your own magic but after that speech you just gave”—Tiernan shared a look with Keir—“we realized you may not.”

“Oh, really?” I gave him an irritated look. “What gave it away?” I transferred my stare to Keir. “You knew I was in the dark about my magic.”

“I thought I'd made your complete control clear to you earlier today.” Keir held up a hand to ward off my anger.

“I didn't know that included basic needs such as eating.” I rolled my eyes and then widened them. “Do I need to tell him to use the bathroom?”

“I believe relieving his body is something that happens automatically, and as such, can't be prevented,” Keir assured me. “But if you don't want him to suffer, you may wish to compel him to eat. Not that I would mind his suffering. He's Fey so he can't starve to death.”

“Watch it, Dad.” I grimaced at him. “Your unseelie blood is showing.”

“Seren,” Keir said seriously, “you're an extinguisher; you know that both courts have their wicked ways. The unseelie are just more honest about it.”

“Yeah, I get that, but it wasn't the Seelie who I had to watch torture other fairies.” I sighed and looked over at Bress. “Eat, Bress, eat whenever you're hungry, and if you need to go to the bathroom to relieve yourself, do that too... in the toilet.”

Bress looked over at me immediately and then smiled brightly and began to reach for the food in front of him. Damn, I *had* been torturing him; sitting him at a table full of food and not allowing him to have any of it. Did he deserve such treatment? Perhaps. But was it justice? I didn't think so.

“Maybe I should remove the enchantment and let you imprison him.” I sighed.

“I know I would rather have my senses and sit in a dungeon than live in luxury and remain like this.” Tiernan waved a hand toward Bress.

“Fine,” I agreed. “But let him eat first.”

“As Your Highness wishes.” Tiernan gave me a little smile.

“Why does that make you happy?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Because then he'll be able to interrogate our prisoner.” Keir stared out at the court, avoiding my gaze.

“So, you stopped me from torturing Bress so that *you* could torture him?” I lifted a brow at Tiernan.

“My torture is more honorable than yours,” he said simply.

“For who?” I frowned. “Him or you?”

“Both of us.”

Before I could say any more, the door at the end of the room opened and Sir Ainsley came through with two fairies following after him. The unknown fairies were sylphs; air fairies with delicate wings rising from their shoulders. One female and one male. The woman had bright golden hair while the male's tresses were slightly darker. The Twilight Court went silent as the sylphs made their way down the center aisle and then stopped before us.

“Greetings King Keir and Princess Seren,” the female sylph said, and I saw that her eyes were a familiar shade of green. “I am Lady Neala, mother to Nighean, and this is my son, Aodh.”

“Welcome, Lady and Lord Silvereed,” Keir said warmly. “Nighean is resting upstairs, but I'm sure she'd be pleased if you woke her. I am greatly relieved that you made it here so quickly and in good health.”

“The benefits of wings, Your Majesty.” She smiled and then turned her gaze toward me. “Thank you for saving my daughter, Princess Seren. Your father told me how you rescued her from the Unseelie. We have mourned her for many years; believing her to be dead. To have her returned to us is a gift I can never repay.” Her eyes went glassy with tears.

“You're not supposed to repay gifts.” I gave her a smile. “It's enough for me to see Nighean reunited with her family.”

“Sir Ainsley will take you up to your daughter.” Keir nodded to the knight, and Ainsley led them out.

“I'm going with them,” I whispered to Keir and started to rise.

“No, Seren.” Keir held a hand out to me, and I sat back down with a confused frown. “You have to finish the feast, and then you may go.”

“What?” I gave him a baffled look. “You want me to finish my brussels sprouts before I go outside to play, Dad?”

“This is part of being a princess,” he said sternly. “You must see to your people first, and then you can do as you please.”

“It's just dinner,” I huffed.

“And also a time when our fairies may approach us if they wish to seek our help or guidance.” Keir gave me a look which clearly said I wasn't going to win this argument. “Besides, you have business to attend to before you can attend Nighean.” He waved a hand at Bress, who had finished gorging himself and was sitting back in his seat contentedly.

“Yeah, all right,” I said and then turned to Tiernan. “Better get out your manacles, Lord of the Wild Hunt.”

Chapter Forty-One

Restraining Bress wasn't a problem since I kept him enchanted all the way down to the dungeon. It was two floors below the dining hall and was actually pretty nice for a dungeon; not that I'd seen a lot of them. It had clean cells equipped with sturdy beds, little private bathrooms, and small dining sets. They looked pretty damn comfortable... except for the bars and bare stone walls that is.

I waited until Bress was locked away in one of the cells—the only one now occupied—before I released him from the enchantment. He immediately fell to his knees; his whole body shaking as he lost the contents of his stomach all over the stone floor.

“Maybe I shouldn't have let him eat first,” I said dryly.

“My Lord Bress, are you all right?” Tiernan called out tersely. “There is a washroom behind you if you need some water.”

Bress spat, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and then rolled his eyes up to stare at me. His shoulders were tense and his expression was enraged. I caught myself just before I took a step back. He got to his feet and approached the bars slowly, as if he were stalking prey.

“So, Cousin,” he growled low, “you have quite a useful magic. I guess you aren't as defenseless as we'd thought.”

“I'm an extinguisher, I was never defenseless,” I said calmly.

“Yes, yes.” Bress waved a hand; his elegance returning

quickly, like a cloak he could just swing over his shoulders. “But in Fairy, magic is far more important than your human psychic abilities.”

“And so is blood,” Tiernan added. “You've attacked a princess, my lord, and you will be held accountable. Take some time to recover but know that I will return and then we will have a conversation about what you've done and what else you had planned to do with your uncle's help.”

“You've made me betray my own family.” Bress ignored Tiernan and set his eyes on me. “I will have vengeance for that.”

“I *am* your family, you psychotic, perverted, sadist,” I snarled and then turned on my heel and left.

Tiernan followed me; leaving Bress sputtering in his cell with the smell of his own vomit as his only company. We went up the stairs in silence and then continued up to the third floor, where Nighean was staying. We were almost to her room when Tiernan spoke.

“*Now,* are you okay with me torturing him?”

“No.” I stopped and stared at him in shock. “Torture is not okay. It will *never* be okay. It may become necessary or even enjoyable if you are wronged enough, but it's never okay.”

“It *is* necessary, Your Highness.” Tiernan's face went cool.

“Don't get all stuffy with me just because I disagree with you,” I huffed. “I know it's necessary, I get that, but I'm still not okay with it.”

“I understand.” His eyes softened. “You don't have to be a part of it. I will shoulder the burden for you.”

“Well, that hardly seems fair.” I exhaled roughly.

“There are responsibilities that come with being royalty,”

he began, and I started to give him a dark look, but he held up his hand. “Let me finish. There are responsibilities but there are also benefits. Not having to torture your own enemies is one of the perks.”

“Wow, I have the strangest urge to laugh, but I know it's totally inappropriate.”

“As if that's ever stopped you before.” Tiernan rolled his eyes.

“You know, you are one of the most human fairies I've ever met.” I nudged his shoulder with my own.

“I could take offense to that, but I don't want to be angry with you so I choose not to.” He grimaced.

“I just meant that you speak more like a modern human than some medieval knight,” I explained.

“I've spent a lot of time among the humans,” he said. “It's kind of my job.”

“Right; you patrol us, and I patrol the Fey,” I said.

“Except now, you're a fairy too,” he said gently.

“Yeah, there's that.” I pushed the door open and went in to find Nighean's mother and brother sitting on the bed with her.

They were stunningly beautiful, with their shivering wings spread out around them like the petals of alien flowers. They looked up at us and all three of them gave us brilliant smiles. It was like a painting; Nighean in that huge, four-poster bed with drapes of gauzy white fabric pulled back behind her. There was a large window to the right; showcasing the starlit sky and outlining Neala so that she seemed to glow. Aodh, on the left, somehow managed to look extremely masculine despite his delicate wings and was a perfect foil to the fragile femininity of the women beside

him.

“Princess Seren”—Nighean motioned me in—“come meet my family.”

“I've met them.” I walked up to the bed. “Well, sort of.” I stuck my hand out to her mother first. “I'm Seren.”

“Nice to meet you, Your Highness.” Neala smiled as she shook my hand.

I repeated the handshake with Aodh and then sat in the chair Tiernan brought forward for me.

“This is Count Tiernan.” I waved at Tiernan, who nodded to both of Nighean's relatives. “Nighean, now that you're doing better, I wanted to ask you about the Unseelie Court.”

“Yes, Your Highness?” Her eyes went wide, and she glanced at her family apprehensively.

“Not about what happened,” I assured her and saw her relax a little. “I want to know how many prisoners they have. I saw around six tortured that night, including yourself. Do you know how many more there are?”

“Perhaps thirty-five or forty,” she whispered. “They've been taking seelie prisoners for as long as I can remember.”

“There are hundreds of Seelie missing, Your Highness,” Aodh said, casting his mother a grim look. “Most are presumed dead which, if Nighean's numbers are correct, is a fair assumption.”

“Only Seelie?” I lifted a brow. “Weren't there any Twilight Fey there?”

“Twilight Fey are never taken,” Tiernan answered before she could. “They are neutral, like the Court and the Kingdom, and to take one would be to risk losing this barrier between the Light

and Dark.”

“Except for their princess,” I huffed.

“Hatred can cloud a man's judgment as easily as love can,” Tiernan said softly. “King Uisdean made a big mistake when he took you, and he's very lucky that you escaped. If you hadn't, we'd have gone to war. It was what we were preparing for when you arrived.”

“War?” I lifted my brows.

“Princess Seren, you must know the type of man your father is by now,” Tiernan frowned. “He would never have allowed a single one of his fairies to be held prisoner by either court. He would have gone immediately to negotiate their release but for you, there would have been no negotiation. King Keir would have demanded your release and if they didn't instantly comply, it would have been war.”

“And my uncle was willing to risk that,” I said quietly.

“I think King Uisdean believes your father to be the sort of king who would do anything for his people,” Tiernan said slowly. “That King Keir wouldn't risk upsetting the balance, even for you.”

“Uisdean insinuated that my father is weak.” I nodded.

“Humph.” Tiernan gave a light snort. “All people see is the kind king who keeps the peace and takes in the strays. King Uisdean has let that color his image of your father. He hasn't seen King Keir fight, much less face him on the battlefield, so he has no idea how strong your father actually is.”

“Battlefield?” I glanced at the sylphs, who were listening avidly to our conversation. “I thought royals couldn't be killed? Isn't that an unfair advantage in a battle?”

“Battle is the only time that rule doesn't apply,” Tiernan

said grimly. “So, if King Keir had declared war on the Unseelie, he could have lawfully killed King Uisdean.”

“Whoa,” I whispered and then something occurred to me. I looked back to the sylphs. “Why doesn't the Seelie Court negotiate for their prisoners?”

“Our monarchs are unwilling to deal with the Unseelie.” Neala's eyes darted away.

“What if they didn't have to deal with them directly?” I asked. “Or negotiate at all?”

“What are you thinking?” Tiernan looked at me sharply.

“Bress led us out through some secret passages beneath the Unseelie Castle,” I said to Tiernan. “I believe I can find my way back in.”

“Absolutely not,” Tiernan said.

“You're not the boss of me,” I growled back.

“Seren.” He sighed and then corrected himself when he saw the surprised looks the sylphs were giving us. “*Princess* Seren, you cannot endanger yourself in this manner.”

“Well, I'm the only one who knows the way.” I lifted a brow at him.

“Then it can't be done,” he shot back.

“I will do what I feel is right.” I stood and glowered at him.

“Your Highness,” Aodh interrupted, “if you go back, I will go with you.”

“Aodh!” Nighean cried. “No, you can't! Don't go there.”

“A *princess* of another court is willing to risk her life to

save members of ours, and you would have me remain behind?" He shook his head. "No, Sister. She saved you, and if she's willing to help us save more, then I will help her in any way I can. You have my sword, Princess Seren," he said to me. "And I may be able to call in a few more."

"That's wonderful"—I smiled at Aodh—"but we don't need a lot of fairies with us. This will not be a fight but a stealthy rescue. Hopefully, we won't have to engage the Unseelie at all."

"You will not engage them because you will not be leaving this castle," Tiernan snapped. "I'll tell the King."

"You're going to tattle on me?" I gaped at him. "What are you, three?"

"I..." Tiernan stammered and then crossed his arms across his chest. "I am a member of the Star's Guard, and I will protect my princess in any way necessary."

"You're a horrible pain in the ass is what you are," I huffed. "When did you turn into Torquil?"

"You did not just..." his jaw dropped and then he recovered. "This is not a good idea."

"I can't just leave them there, Tiernan." I swallowed hard. "You don't know what I saw."

"Oh, I can imagine." Tiernan's jaw flexed, and he glanced at the other fairies in the room. "There are prisoners in the Seelie Court too, you realize."

"What?" I went still, and the sylphs shifted guiltily.

"You thought the Unseelie were the only ones who enjoyed torturing their enemies?" Tiernan lifted a brow at me. "You, an extinguisher? You should know better than that."

"I do. I know that all fairies have the potential to be evil,

just as all humans do." I shook my head. "But after spending the night with the Unseelie, I'm feeling a little biased."

"The Light Court can be just as cruel as the Dark," Tiernan declared. "And you rescuing the seelie prisoners while you do nothing for the unseelie, will be seen as an act of war."

"Excuse me?" A horrible cold ache began to work its way into my gut.

"You are the Twilight Princess," he growled. "You are supposed to be neutral, which means you don't interfere. There are *laws!*"

"I *am* the law," I growled, then frowned, jerked, and blinked rapidly. "And evidently I'm also Judge Dredd." I shook my head and continued. "I've already told you; I won't stop being an extinguisher just because I'm—" I waved a hand at my stupid frilly dress.

"A fairy princess?" He asked dryly.

"Whatever." I rolled my eyes. "You said the Fairy Council wants me to continue as an extinguisher, and an extinguisher would never leave people behind to be tortured. I will do what I feel is right; being a princess is not going to change that."

"If you care anything for your people it will!" Tiernan's eyes were starting to glow. "You think you're being noble, rescuing the Seelie? This is the opposite of nobility. This is reckless and very, very stupid, Seren. Your actions will endanger us all!"

The sylphs gasped, and Cat started to growl at Tiernan. I put my hand out to her, and she whined and then nudged my fingers.

"What do I do then, T?" I whispered.

“First of all, never call me *T* again.” He sighed heavily. “Second, I have no idea. This has been the way of things for thousands of years.”

“Could I barter the seelie prisoners in exchange for the unseelie?” I offered, and Tiernan's brows lifted.

“Your Highness?” Aodh asked hesitantly.

“You got an idea?” I asked him.

“We also have secret ways into our court.” Aodh glanced at his mother and sister. They both wore horrified expressions, but he went on despite them. “If you would free the Seelie, I will help you sneak them into our court and also help you free the Unseelie for you to secret back to their court. No one will have any proof of how it was done or who it was done by and although they may have their suspicions, I believe both courts will be so happy to have their fairies returned to them that they will not delve too far into the matter. Would that satisfy you, my Lord Shadowcall?”

“It's madness.” Tiernan shook his head and then gave me a little smile. “But it just may work.”

Chapter Forty-Two

We decided not to risk bringing anyone else in to help us. It would be a clandestine operation that we weren't even telling my father about. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission. So, it would only be Aodh, Tiernan, and I riding out to the Unseelie Court with three carriages; one for each of us. Hopefully, we'd have enough room to fit all of the seelie prisoners.

“What are you doing?” The deep rumble came from behind me, making me jump. I turned to see Conri leaning in the stable's doorway.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Tiernan answered crisply as he finished attaching the lead to my horses.

“Have you already forgotten that I'm a member of the Star's Guard?” Conri straightened and sidled over with the graceful gait of a predator.

“The what?” Aodh asked from where he was already seated atop his coach.

“My personal Guard,” I said to Aodh before I looked back at Conri. “I'm fine, Conri, go back inside the castle.”

“Where are you going with three empty carriages, Princess?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“This is a private matter that the Princess and I must attend to,” Tiernan said briskly. “She is well protected.”

“We have to go,” Aodh urged.

“I'm not letting you go anywhere with only a sylph and one

knight to guard you," Conri growled. "No matter if that knight is a *Lord of the Wild Hunt*." He said the last bit in a mocking tone, as if he was tired of hearing it said, which made me grin.

"Get in the damn carriage," I said as I climbed up onto the driver's seat.

"You're not going to like where we're going," Tiernan warned Conri.

"I'll like it better than allowing the Princess to go without me." Conri smirked as he headed toward my carriage.

"Fine"—Tiernan grabbed Conri by the shoulder and spun him around—"but you're riding with me. I'll explain on the way." Tiernan turned and got up onto his carriage, which was in front of mine.

"He's jealous of our love." Conri winked at me before he jumped up onto the seat beside Tiernan.

Tiernan gave an irritated huff and slapped the reins down lightly. His carriage rolled out into the courtyard smoothly and then through the warded gates. The gate guards, who believed I was on my way to the Human Realm on urgent Council business, merely nodded respectfully as we passed.

"That bargest is going to be incorrigible now," I said to Cat as I shook my head. I couldn't leave her behind either, she was just as tenacious as Conri. So, I'd compromised by letting her help pull my carriage in her horse form.

We were traveling as fast as possible; trying to get to the Unseelie Castle right at dawn so that all of our magics would be at their strongest. Granted, mine would only be empowered for a little while, but Aodh and Tiernan would get a boost all day... and how unfair is that, by the way? I only get a power surge twice a day for maybe fifteen minutes, at the most an hour, depending on where I am in the world. So not right.

After a couple hours, we came to a large hill with a tunnel going through its center. The road led right up to it; the forest crowding in on either side as if herding us in. I didn't recognize this side, but I knew this was the passage we'd taken to get from Unseelie to Twilight. A fairy mound within Fairy, like a wormhole through space. It occurred to me then that we were crossing continents; that if I were in the Human Realm, I'd basically be traveling from America to China in mere moments. How convenient for a raid into the Unseelie Court. Or if I wanted to go to China.

The stone archway outlining the tunnel's mouth was barred by golden gates. They were shut firmly, and I frowned at that. I didn't remember any gates opening the last time I came through, but then again, I hadn't been paying attention to the fairy mound and it had been pretty dark. Now, I was able to make out the image of a full moon suspended over a castle on the gate. The castle was perched on a hill with a forest surrounding its base. The forest and castle were carved from pieces of onyx but the moon was silver.

Tiernan's carriage was nearly to the mound when the gates swung open; splitting the moon and the scene in two with a silent and rapid movement. Tiernan didn't even pause, just drove his team of horses into the dark. I spared a glance for the detailed silverwork of the gate as I followed him in.

The dark didn't scare me anymore. The more I walked these roads in-between, the more I felt my power over them. I was safer here than anywhere else. Even if I were to leap from the seat of the carriage and fling myself into that unknown black, I would be fine. I knew it in my bones. I could change the dark, fill the void, and alter the path entirely with just a thought. This was my world, and nothing could defeat me while I stood in the Between.

I took a deep, satisfied breath and let the power course through me. My skin began to glow softly, and I smiled to myself. How strange that I felt the most at ease within a void. Then a glimmer of gold pierced the shadows as the gates opened for

Tiernan. We rode through, and I glanced at them but on the inside, they were just unadorned sheets of gold.

Outside of the mound, the sky was still inky black and full of stars. There seemed to be more celestial bodies in Fairy than in HR, but I knew that was just because they were easier to see without the blinding lights of human cities obscuring their sparkle. Still, the night seemed more magical, more powerful. I breathed in the pure, crisp air and let it clear my head of the rush I'd received from the path in-between. My skin had muted down to normal, but its previous glow must have been enough to attract the attention of a moth, which landed on my hand.

It was a large moth, perhaps six inches across, and had a bright red, furry body and two, large, ruby spots on its wings; giving it the appearance of predator eyes. They even glimmered a little like cat eyes; the opalescence in the moth dust catching the moonlight. Those wings shivered as the moth tip-toed slowly up my arm to cling to my shoulder.

“Hey there.” I glanced down at it; not at all bothered by its presence. This insect was one of mine, a twilight creature, and I sensed our connection immediately. “I'm on a super secret mission to rescue a bunch of fairies. You wanna tag along?”

The moth shivered again and then crawled down onto the seat beside me. He made his way back; wedging himself in a corner of the seat cushion to escape the wind.

“I guess that's a yes.” I grinned.

We had to stop a bit away from the castle so we could hide the carriages in the forest. If the imprisoned fairies were too injured to travel that far, we'd just have to run back to fetch them and hope no one spotted us. The moth stayed in his little nook, and I was glad for it. He may just be an insect, but I didn't want to risk his little moth life in the Unseelie Castle.

“Watch over everything for me, Cat.” I gave her neck a pat

as I headed past the horses.

She huffed and gave me an annoyed look. I knew she wanted to come along, but this was as far as I was willing to take her. Yes, she could probably help protect me, but she could also bark at the wrong moment and totally screw us. No, pukas didn't belong on covert missions. At least not without more training. Plus, it would take too long to get her bridled again.

"There it is," I said as we crept over the rolling hills that surrounded the Unseelie Castle. "Follow me."

I led the men to a distinctive grouping of rocks behind and below the castle. The sky was lightening, already purple instead of black, so I could clearly see the castle looming above us. The path to the castle's entrance wound gently up a gradual slope but there, at the castle's back, the rock face was a sheer drop. Looking up at the soaring towers was dizzying so I focused instead on finding the large boulder that completely camouflaged the entrance. I eased around it to find an open tunnel; there wasn't even a door barring the way. I was about to go in when Tiernan grabbed me.

"Hold on." Tiernan waved a hand over the entrance and it shimmered. "There are wards in place."

"No, we walked out without a problem," I insisted.

"I'm sure you did"—Tiernan shared a look with Aodh and Conri—"when you were with Bress."

"Oh, damn and double damn!" I hissed. "We should have brought him with us."

"Did you just say *double damn*?" Conri drawled. "You're adorable."

"Relax." Tiernan held up his hand, ignoring Conri. "We just need to wait a few minutes for sunrise."

“You can get past this?” I asked with surprise.

“Shadowcall, remember?” He smirked at me. “This ward is shadow magic.”

“Well, that's convenient.” I started to grin.

“I don't think they were expecting a seelie with shadow magic to try and infiltrate their castle.” Tiernan shrugged.

“You must annoy them.” I chuckled.

“He annoys everyone,” Conri declared, “and he's very good at it.”

“Are we talking about me or you?” Tiernan lifted a brow.

Then I inhaled sharply as the night gave way to day and the closeness of sunrise brought a surge of power. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Conri shiver through the twilight magic with me. Titillating tingles spread through my veins and then my vision shifted from the dark tunnel to another scene entirely.

I was standing in a room with a group of fairies before me, and they were running toward me with malicious intent. I saw my hand lift to my chin and felt the breath rush from my throat as I blew over my fingertips. A cloud of sparkling, lavender dust flew out from my fingers to settle over the fairies. They fell to the ground, immediately fast asleep. Then I shivered and blinked as my vision shifted back to reality, and I found three men staring at me in concern.

“I'm the god damned sandman,” I whispered.

“What does she mean?” Aodh looked over at Tiernan as Conri continued to watch me carefully.

“I believe she's had a vision.” Tiernan frowned. “What did you see, Princess Seren?”

“I saw myself putting fairies to sleep.” I lifted a brow. “Do you think it means what I think it means?”

“Yes, I believe so.” Tiernan grinned and glanced over to Aodh and Conri. “It seems that she's inherited her father's gift of dream-dusting. Not exactly a fearsome magic, but it'll come in handy.”

“Especially when I don't want to kill anyone,” I said as the sun came up, and the two seelie men inhaled sharply.

“If killing needs to be done, I'll take care of it,” Tiernan said grimly as his eyes began to glow and, just like that, the Lord of the Wild Hunt took over my mission.

Maybe I had been fooling myself with thinking I'd ever been in charge. Clearly, this was a man who led much better than he followed.

“You're not the only one capable of killing.” Conri rolled his eyes. “But if you want to go into the dark unseelie tunnel first, then by all means.”

Tiernan gave Conri a stern look before he held his hand up to the tunnel's entrance and concentrated. The darkness coalesced into a sphere of shifting shadows which hovered in the air before him. He scooped up the sphere and cast it aside. As soon as it hit the sunlight, it burst apart and disappeared.

Without even a backward glance at us, Tiernan headed into the tunnel. I rushed ahead of him, though. He may lead better than he followed, but he wasn't going to lead us anywhere if he didn't know where he was going.

I saw him flinch a little as he realized the same thing and then he waved his hand; gesturing for me to take over. I gave a low chuckle and set off, going through the escape in my head, laying out the map of it, and following it backward to the beginning. I'd been trained to remember this sort of thing; routes through places,

distinguishing landmarks, and facial features. This was easy for me —fun even—and if I hadn't been on such a serious mission, I might have enjoyed myself.

The tunnels were empty, and we made good time in reaching the lower levels of the castle, but once we were there, I realized there was another flaw to our plan. I had no idea where they kept the seelie prisoners. Tiernan saw me hesitate as I stepped out of the tunnels, and he stepped past me to look around.

“Prisoners are commonly kept in cells.” Tiernan glanced back at me. “True for humans and fairies.”

“Excellent,” I said and looked around the large room. “You think those cells are down here?”

We were in the bowels of the castle and the room we stood in was carved out of the mountain itself. The stone was roughhewn, with obvious tool marks marring its damp surface. The floor was smoother than the walls, laid with tiles of some kind of gray stone. Directly in front of us was a set of stairs and although it was too dark to see how far up they went, I knew from my last journey down them that they went quite far. At the base of the stairs, a hook was set into the wall and a lantern hung from it. Its soft glow illuminated the entrances of the corridors to either side of us.

“They most likely are,” Tiernan said as he stared down one of the corridors. “Although, there are several unseelie who are more comfortable within the earth's embrace. There could be living quarters down here too.”

Conri gave a long sniff in both directions and then pointed down the left corridor. “That way smells of blood and fear.”

“All right then, blood and fear it is.” I began walking toward the corridor, but Conri's warm hand slid into mine and pulled me to a stop.

“Let me go first, Your Highness.” He tapped his nose. “I can find the way faster.”

“No kidding.” I waved a hand in front of me, and Conri let go of me to pad down the dark corridor as quiet as a mouse, or whatever they called a mouse in Fairy.

Tiernan slid in front of me before I could head after Conri, and I made a face at his back as I followed. Aodh closed in behind us. The hallway went straight back without a bend or door to be found and then it opened up suddenly into a large room with two more corridors branching off it. There was a table made of thick wood planks with a few crude chairs around it, placed in front of a fireplace on the right side of the room. The fireplace wasn't all that large, but it had several weapons hanging above its mantle; an axe, a mace, a couple spears, and a crossbow. They imparted an air of intimidation that even the teapot, hanging above the cheery fire, couldn't alleviate. Although, that could have been more due to the fact that a hag stood near the fireplace, reaching for that kettle. Then there were the two goblins and a bodach, sitting at the table nearby.

A bodach is a nasty male fairy whose pastimes include stealing human children. This particular one was old-man-thin with sagging, jaundiced skin and bulging, cloudy, blue eyes. Eyes which he set on us with shocked glee. Conri started to growl and stepped forward while Tiernan pulled his sword, but I went between them, held up a hand, and blew harshly across my fingertips.

A glittering dust wafted out and drifted over all four of the unseelie fairies. Their eyes widened with a jerk and then drifted shut as they all fell into a deep slumber. The hag was lucky and fell backward or she would have landed in the fire. The two goblins just plopped their heads down on the table, but the bodach fell face forward on the grimy stone floor; knocking his head loud enough to make me wince.

“Sweet dreams.” I smirked. Yep. I was the Sandman... or Sandwoman, I guess. Too bad I wasn't a witch, that would have been a great joke.

“That was so unfair.” Conri scowled at me. “Do you know how long it's been since I've seen any action?”

“About five hours?” Tiernan smirked.

“Jealous?” Conri shot back.

“We want to be as quiet as possible, don't we?” I interrupted before the talk turned into a sexual innuendo squabble.

“I guess,” Conri grumbled as he kicked the bodach over onto his back and pulled two massive sets of keys from his belt. The bargest frowned down at the rings and then tossed one to Tiernan before he headed off down the left corridor. Aodh gave me a smiling shrug as he followed Conri.

“Shall we?” Tiernan nodded at the hallway on the right.

I followed him into a passage lined with cells. It was just a large room divided up by walls of bars to create several cells to either side of us. It smelled rank, and I don't think it was fear or blood I was smelling. I wrinkled my nose as I peered into the shadows, searching for any sign of life.

Tiernan went to the very first door and started trying keys in the locks. After the fourth attempt, we heard someone coming down the corridor and both of us tensed, hands going to our weapons, but it was just Aodh, holding up the other set of keys.

“Wrong ones,” he huffed and tossed them to me. Tiernan tossed him our set, and Aodh ran out again.

“Here.” I handed Tiernan the new keys, and he quickly found one that worked.

The door creaked open in the way that all dungeon doors

are required to, and Tiernan handed me the keys before heading in. I went straight across the corridor to another cell. Metal scraped against metal as I tried several keys before finding a winner. The door swung open, giving its metallic screech just as its neighbor had, and I edged into the gloom.

“Hello?” I whispered. “I'm here to take you home, I'm not an unseelie. Is anyone here? This is a rescue, I promise.” I know, I sounded like an idiot, but it was my first rescue, give me a break.

“Yes,” a voice whispered. “I'm here. Who are you?”

“I'm Extinguisher, er, uh, Princess Seren of Twilight.” I found him sitting in a corner, legs pulled up tightly to his chest, clutching what looked to be a bloody blanket.

“Twilight? The Twilight Court never interferes.” He blinked up at me with large, rounded, coffee-colored eyes that shone liquid in the dark.

“We do now.” I bent down and offered him a hand.

He stared at my hand for a moment and then took it resolutely and allowed me to help him stand. When the filtered light hit him, I saw that he was a selkie, a type of fairy who can change into a seal simply by slipping on his seal skin. Their skins were their most prized possessions, and if they were damaged, the selkie would be unable to change until it was healed. If the skin was destroyed, so was the selkie.

The blanket he'd been holding wasn't a blanket at all, it was his seal skin. Tattered, torn, and covered in blood, he still held it as if his life depended on it, which I suppose it did. His body was nearly as abused as that skin, bleeding in several places and cut so deeply in some of them that I could see more than bloody flesh. The dull custard-yellow of fat and gleaming white of bone had me swallowing back bile.

I had to help him hobble out of the cell, and I almost ran

into Tiernan, who was bringing out a buttery sprite. No wonder I hadn't been able to see anyone in that cell; she was a tiny thing, just a little over a foot high. Her bruised body was huddled in on itself, her delicate arms wrapped around her emaciated chest, but her eyes stared up at me with a spark of survival. We led them into the guard's room, and they huddled together in front of the fire with the prisoners who'd been freed by Aodh and Conri.

We ran back to the occupied cells. There were so many of them that we decided to go down the line and unlock all the doors first; urging out those who could walk on their own before we went back for the more critically injured. But word of our rescue had already spread and the prisoners required no urging. Those that could, stood waiting for us at their cell doors and once freed, they went immediately to help the others. It wasn't long before we'd emptied the entire length of cells. We found the guard room full of seelie when we returned but there was no sign of Aodh or Conri.

“I'll go help them. You stay here.” Tiernan ran off.

“Does everyone who needs assistance have it?” I asked the group and saw them all nod. “Will you all be able to walk?”

“Yes,” a bean-tigh answered, her elderly appearance tugging at my heart. “If you can lead us out of here, we will walk. We'll crawl if necessary.”

My throat constricted with her words so all I could do was nod. They were all beaten, cut, or broken in some horrible way, and yet they would have dragged their broken limbs across a field of glass to escape the Unseelie Court. After witnessing only one night of what they had been put through, I know I would have too. I would have done anything to escape that existence.

I had to take deep breaths to calm my rising anger. I wanted to run out of that room and slaughter all of the Unseelie for what they'd done. Instead, I focused on what I could do to help the injured seelie while we waited for the others to return. I pulled

clothes and shoes off the guards and passed them out to the fairies; tearing some of the clothes to make bandages for the worst of the wounds.

Then she came limping in.

A human girl, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Her hair was probably a bright, strawberry blonde normally but it was dingy with sweat and blood. Soft, doe eyes squinted in the low light, one of them swollen shut. She was covered in bruises and cradled a bloody arm to her chest. Aodh was helping her walk since one of her ankles appeared to be twisted.

“Here, let me help.” I took her from him gently. “What's your name?”

“Amanda,” she croaked out, and I saw that she had bruises on her neck as well... in the shape of fingers.

“We're going to get you home, Amanda,” I whispered. “I just need you to hang on a little longer.”

“Okay.” She gave me a small smile and a cut on her lips cracked and began to bleed.

“That's all of them. Let's move.” Tiernan came up behind us with Conri. He was carrying a brownie, and Conri held a kobold, a type of shapeshifting fairy.

The prisoners needed no further coaxing. We moved, and we did so as quickly as possible. I had no idea how long we had before the guards woke. We couldn't kill them; bodies left behind might start a war. So, I dusted them once more before we left and hoped for the best.

Nighean's count had been off just a little; it looked as if there were only thirty fey. I cast a glance up the stairs as we passed them, thinking that perhaps the others were up there, entertaining their hosts. Then I pushed the thought away because if it was true,

there was nothing I could do about it. I had to focus on helping the ones I could.

We made it out to the fresh air but it was clear that the seelie were too injured to travel all the way back to where we'd left the carriages. So, Tiernan, Aodh, and I scurried off to fetch them while Conri stayed behind to guard the freed fairies.

When I climbed into the driver's seat, I noticed that the moth was gone, but I didn't think anything of it. I was too busy maneuvering my coach back onto the road so I could follow Tiernan back to where we'd left the seelie. We barreled along; knowing that silence didn't matter at this point, the guards would most likely spot us under the glare of the sun. All we could hope for was enough speed to get back fast enough to grab the seelie and escape.

We arrived just as the imposing onyx gates of the Unseelie Castle flew open. A contingent of knights shot through the gates and headed in our direction. The sight brought us all an adrenaline rush, and we loaded the carriages like luggage handlers on crack. Some of the seelie suffered for our haste, but no one spoke a word of protest. I think everyone agreed that it was better to be hurt during an escape than be recaptured.

I got the last fairy into my carriage and climbed up into the driver's seat. We were so full that I had one of the less injured fairies sitting up beside me.

“Allow me, Your Highness.” Conri jumped up on the other side of the seelie woman and took the reins. “I can handle horses almost as well as I do women.”

Conri spared a second to wink at me before he slapped the reins down hard; jolting the horses into action. I heard shouting from behind us and called out encouragement to the animals, especially Cat. I didn't want her to think I'd forgotten she was there. I was slowly becoming aware that animals in Fairy could

understand what was said to them. Or perhaps being fey helped with that. Whatever it was, the horses put on an extra burst of speed, and we raced through the sleepy forest like a shooting star.

“If you're listening again, Danu, we could sure use your help,” I prayed as I turned in my seat; gripping the roof of the carriage so I could watch for our pursuers.

In movies, it seems as if the landscape often fits the action. If something scary happens, the ambiance darkens to help set the mood. Maybe I'd seen too many movies because fleeing the Unseelie through a sunlit forest, full of vibrantly colored leaves and happy birdsong, just seemed wrong. Chirping was not an appropriate soundtrack for this situation.

But then the mood changed.

As soon as Aodh's carriage made it into the woods, a loud, tearing rustle came from behind us, and the trees began to move. The seelie woman beside me turned to join me in gaping backward as massive roots yanked themselves free of the ground; sending showers of dirt flying through the air. They slithered and crawled, moving the mass of their ancient trunks like hermit crabs across sand. Then they settled like old women; groaning and creaking as their roots dug into the road behind us.

Vines sprung out of the earth and snaked around the trees; weaving them into a living tapestry. Branches shivered as the thick cords reached all the way up to the treetops. Then bursts of color started to explode across the verdant backdrop; flowers. A beautiful mockery to the unseelie knights who were now incapable of giving chase. A joyous cry erupted from the carriages. We were safe.

“Thanks again.” I glanced up at the bright blue sky, which seemed much more appropriate now, and then set my eyes back on the road. “I hope I can repay my debt someday.”

“Who are you talking to?” The glastig sitting between

Conri and me, asked. One of her goat legs was bent at the wrong angle, but she paid it no mind as she stared at me, wide-eyed.

“Danu,” I said simply.

“Who are you, my lady?” She was still beautiful, despite the cuts that ran down her cheek and across her chest, and I knew she could use that beauty to seduce men... and then kill them. Still, I was happy to have saved her, and I'd be just as happy to free the imprisoned unseelie.

“She's the Twilight Star.” Conri gave me a gentle smile and, for the briefest moment, I saw behind the mask of the seducer, into the heart that Danu, and now I, believed in.

Chapter Forty-Three

We couldn't risk taking the seelie back to the Twilight Castle and have my father discover what we'd done, so we had to take them directly to the Seelie Court. Unfortunately, the fairy mound which led to the Seelie Court was all the way on the other side of the Twilight Kingdom and we couldn't make it that far by nightfall. So, after a few hours, we decided to make camp.

When I opened the door of my carriage, the moth that I'd completely forgotten about flew out and landed on my shoulder. “There you are.” I gave it a quick glance before I reached up to help my passengers out.

“I don't know how you did it, but thank you for bringing us a mending moth,” said an apsara—a fairy of clouds and waters—as she took my hand.

“A what?” I cocked my head at her as she found her feet.

“A mending moth.” She drew a graceful finger down the blood-red fur of the moth's body. “They can heal almost anything with their dust.” Then she leaned down to speak to the moth, “Thank you again, little one.”

The moth shivered happily, and I gaped at it. I looked the apsara over and saw that her wounds had been healed. No bruises marred her dark skin, there was no blood in her long, straight, ebony hair, and her exotic, Indian features were perfectly smooth instead of swollen beyond recognition. Indian as in saris not buckskins, by the way.

“It even worked for me.” Amanda climbed out of the carriage to reveal a shiny new face, a healed arm, and a healed

ankle.

“Damn,” I whispered and looked down at the moth. “You did all that?”

“And more,” the selkie man who'd been in such bad shape just hours earlier, climbed out with a huge grin. He and his sealskin were whole, which meant he'd be able to slip it on and go home to the ocean.

“He's probably worn out,” a tengu—a mountain fairy originally from Japan—climbed out of the carriage, his beak making the words sound hollow. He shook out his wings, which had previously been broken, and stretched his shoulders as he sighed. “I thought I'd never feel this good again. Thank you, my lady, and thank you, tiny healer.” He bowed gallantly to the moth, and it lifted off my shoulder, hovering before the tengu a moment before it flew away.

“Now, I wish I'd sat inside.” The glastig limped over to us with Conri's help.

Cat had slipped her reins by shifting into dog form and raced over to me. She sat contentedly beside me; her jaws hanging open so her tongue could loll out with her heavy panting. I gave her an absent head scratch as more healed seelie piled out of my carriage.

“I'm so sorry,” I said to the glastig as I glanced at the other injured fairies getting out of Tiernan's and Aodh's carriages.

“It's all right.” The glastig grinned. “I'm happy enough to be free of the Unseelie.”

“Still,” I said as Cat leaned into me, “I wish I'd known what that moth could do. I would have asked him to bring along some of his friends.”

As soon as I spoke the words, the air shivered and a loud

fluttering sound came from the forest. In a cloud of shimmering gray and red, more mending moths swooped into the clearing. The injured fairies gathered around me with hopeful expressions as the moths came to rest on my hair, arms, and shoulders. Cat backed away respectfully.

"Whoa, that was fast," I whispered as I held my moth-covered arms out, careful to not injure their delicate wings. "Do you guys wanna help us out? We've got a lot of hurt fairies here, and we would appreciate anything you could do for them."

The swarm left me instantly; spreading out among the wounded. Glittering dust drifted down; settling in cuts and seeping into skin. Flesh knitted together, bones mended, and limbs twisted back into proper alignment. I just watched it all in awe as Cat returned to my side, and Tiernan joined us, sliding his hand into mine. I looked over and saw him staring down at me with a tender expression.

"I've never seen someone call the menders," he whispered. "They're known to be fickle, giving their healing dust only to those who catch their fancy, and then only when the need is dire. To see them give so freely and in these numbers, is astonishing. Miraculous."

"I was astonished even before you told me all of that." I blinked as the glastig's leg settled back into place, and she did a happy jig. "I didn't even know this kind of healing was possible."

"You know; they're like you," he mused.

"The moths? How so?" I set my attention back on him.

"They're half fey and half human." Tiernan gave a little smile. "Well, not *human* but from that realm."

"You mean they were bred from regular old moths from the Human Realm and fairy moths from here?" I felt my eyes widen. "I didn't know that was possible. How did they even meet?"

“Moths have been migrating here from the Human Realm for about fifty years now,” Tiernan explained. “Their numbers are dwindling there and some species are going extinct so they've begun to seek refuge here.”

“Extinct moths?” I lifted my brows.

Then a happy cheer went up from the healed fairies, and I looked over to see the moths fluttering back toward me. I held my arms out to them again, but they only swirled around me this time. I guess their work was done.

“Thank you,” I whispered as soft wings fluttered against my skin. “We won't forget how you helped us. Goodbye, my menders.”

They swooped up together in one glorious mass of color and disappeared into the forest in a spiraling parade. Grateful goodbyes came from the group of seelie and when I looked over, I saw Aodh standing in the middle of a happy, hugging crowd. He pulled away after awhile and sent me a wide smile before he began organizing the fairies into groups. Within moments he had them building campfires, gathering bedding material, and starting a pot of stew with the supplies we'd brought. He even got Conri to help.

“He's a natural leader, that one,” I observed and then caught Tiernan's expectant expression. “Oh, right, you were telling me about the moths going extinct.”

“You know how they're attracted to light?” Tiernan took up right where we'd left off.

“Sure.” I nodded. “Moth to the flame and all that.”

“Well, they actually navigate by moonlight, but the lights of human cities confuse them, and they end up swarming beneath street lamps and becoming prey for night birds and bats.”

“Oh, wait, I think I heard about that... Project Dark Skies,”

I said.

“Project Dark Skies?” Tiernan lifted a brow.

“It's called light pollution, and it doesn't just affect moths,” I continued as I remembered an article I'd read about it. “It hurts a lot of birds too; causing them to migrate too early or sing at night. They can even get so confused that they fly into buildings. Not just the birds either, there's a lot of nocturnal creatures hurt by artificial lighting. Project Dark Skies was actually created so that we could see the stars again in the Human Realm, but then they discovered so many other reasons for promoting darkness. Like saving moths. In fact, the reason I remember the article is because I was surprised to learn that moths pollinate crops, just like bees do.”

“Yes, that's right.” Tiernan smiled softly. “They're just as important as bees are, but most humans think of them only as a nuisance.”

“That's why these people created Project Dark Skies,” I said, “to raise awareness. They also try to get cities to install motion detecting street lamps and encourage private citizens to use motion detecting lights outside as well, or at least cut back on the number of lights they have on at night and to stop using bug zappers.”

“I admit, I'm a little shocked.” Tiernan blinked at me.

“That I know so much about light pollution?” I frowned at him.

“No, that humans are trying to do something about it.” He held up a hand when I started to get offended. “We didn't think they were even aware of the harm they were causing. You must admit that they have a history of hurting the Earth and then figuring it out and trying to fix it after it's too late.”

“Yeah, okay,” I huffed and then a thought occurred to me. “But how did the moths get here?”

“They asked us to bring them,” he said simply, “and so we brought them through. We assumed the humans would try and change things after the moths went extinct, and then the moths could return safely to the Human Realm and help save the ecosystem. We gave them sanctuary, and I believe it was that kindness that inspired the birth of the mending moths. It was their way of repaying the debt. Magic often responds to great emotion, and their gratitude must have been significant.”

“Wait.” I touched his arm. “Creatures from the Human Realm can communicate with us too?”

“We're fairies, Seren.” Tiernan gave me a confused smile. “We speak to all animals. It's kind of our thing.”

“I thought it might be something limited to Fairy,” I said. “Now, I know.” Then I gave a huffing laugh. “Going to the Zoo will be an entirely new experience.”

“Yes, I imagine it would give you a fresh perspective.” He took my hand and started walking me through camp. Cat followed closely. “Did you leave word for your father, as I advised?”

“Yeah, I left him a note saying that I went back to the Human Realm with you to try and speak to my dad again,” I said as I watched the fairies quickly get our little camp in order. I didn't like lying to Keir, but all of this was worth it, and I was pretty sure he'd understand.

Tiernan brought us to the edge of camp where a bush grew; heavily laden with large, round, canary-yellow berries. He pulled a handful free and gave them to me before taking some for himself. I popped one into my mouth and savored the honeyed sweetness of it before tossing one to Cat. She snatched the berry from the air and chewed happily before she decided to cut out the middleman and went directly to the source to harvest the berries herself.

“That was Danu, wasn't it?” Tiernan asked me in between bites of berry.

“Blocking our pursuers in a creative and very dramatic way?” I asked with a lifted brow. He just lifted his brow back. “I'm pretty sure it was.” I shook my head as I watched Cat expertly divest the bush of its bounty. “You know, I was raised Catholic... in a fashion. My rosary was made of rowan wood.” I laughed when Tiernan grimaced. Rowan wood is a strong charm against fairy magic. “But I'd never thought to see the day when I prayed to Goddess for help instead of God.”

“And she actually answered.” Tiernan smiled softly.

“God never did.” I swallowed hard and thought about all the prayers I'd made after my mother's death.

“Even Danu cannot bring back the dead.” Tiernan laid a hand gently on my arm. “You shouldn't fault the Christian god for that. Remember, he was once Anu, Danu's twin.”

“I know, but still, this fairy goddess has made herself known to me and helped me every time I've asked her,” I said. “Religion has always been a type of training for me. I did it because I was taught to. I was told that God gave me my psychic gifts so I could keep the peace between the Fey and the humans. God would help us and keep us safe so we could continue our work. All we had to do was believe in him.”

“Everyone needs something to believe in,” he offered.

“Yes, but he didn't keep my mother safe.” I stared straight into Tiernan's glinting silver eyes. “And he wasn't the one who protected us today either.”

“So, you're a convert?” Tiernan grinned slyly.

“I guess I am.” I laughed and stared up at the darkening sky. I could feel twilight coming.

“And I as well. You've become the face of the Goddess for me,” Tiernan whispered, and I swung my gaze back to him just as

the twilight magic surged through me.

While it was still tingling beneath my skin, I leaned toward Tiernan. His hands slid around my waist and pulled me closer as his lips laid over mine. I could feel the magic rising inside me; condensing beneath his hands. I opened my mouth to him and with the first touch of his tongue, the magic was released. Effervescently bright, it sparkled on my tongue like champagne and sparked between us like a live wire. Tiernan's arms jerked me tighter against him and, for a moment, I thought I was levitating, but then I realized that Tiernan had simply lifted me off the ground.

I groaned as power surged back into me through Tiernan's hands; arching my back with its intensity. It was forming a circuit within us; a magical flow gaining momentum as it went. I let it go once more and it rocketed through me and into him. Tiernan inhaled sharply; stealing my breath before he resumed kissing me with increased vigor. I was clutching him, pulling at his clothes, when the magic seemed to crest, reaching its apex. It burst inside us; leaving us clinging to each other in shivering awe.

The silence around us was shocking after being lost to the pound of hearts and the rasp of rapid breath. I looked over to see that the entire camp was watching us with shocked expressions. Even Cat sat back on her haunches; staring at us in fascination. I realized that they must have felt the magic release. Tiernan gave them a brief glance as he lowered me slowly to the ground and then kissed my forehead sweetly. I met his intense gaze as he backed away and offered me his hand. My heart started to pound faster as I looked from his shining eyes to the crowded meadow of spectators who were suddenly trying to find somewhere else to stare. We'd brought no tents with us, only blankets, and there was no privacy to be had.

“Seren,” Tiernan said softly, “trust me.”

And I did. I trusted him more than I trusted anyone else in

my life. A feat that was amazing given how long I'd known him. I laid my hand in his, and he began to lead me away from camp. Cat whimpered, but I gave her a quick shake of my head, and she went back to eating berries. I let Tiernan take me through the thick trees, deeper into the forest. Little specks of light rose through the underbrush around us and hovered in the air; growing bigger and brighter as the sky darkened.

"Will-o-wisps," I whispered as the orbs began to bob happily around us before flying away. "What are they really?"

"Some think they're remnants of magic." Tiernan glanced back at me. "Some say they're fairy souls who are tied too firmly to the realm to leave. No one knows for certain. They're a part of Fairy and that's all that matters."

"Is that all that matters to you?" I asked softly. "Being a part of Fairy?"

We came out onto a patch of ground that gave beneath my feet like a sponge. I looked down in surprise. Moss; bright green, even in the low light. It spread across the banks of a little pond whose glassy surface reflected the Moon as well as the twinkling stars. The whole clearing was lit softly by that luminescent moon. Along the edges of the moss, a multitude of miniature white flowers glowed in that light as if they were lit from within. I could smell the purity of the water; it seeped down my throat, into my skin, and left me feeling refreshed without my even tasting a drop of it.

"No," Tiernan whispered as he turned around and took my hands. "Being a part of Fairy is not all that matters to me, but I think you knew that already."

Tiernan's mouth lowered as his hands lifted, and I melted forward into him; letting the twilight magic drift away as night claimed the land completely. I didn't need any magic in that moment, there was enough between us already, and the rush of

blood in my veins was more thrilling than any stardust drifting from my fingertips.

One of Tiernan's hands lifted to the side of my face and then slid back into my hair as he deepened the kiss. He tasted sweet, like the berries we'd been eating. But the flavor was richer on his lips, and I lost myself in the taste; so much so that I barely noticed when he slid out of his tunic.

My sword belt with my new sword of fairy steel was on the ground with his and then my tunic over his. Back and forth, our clothing layered on top of each other until we laid down and mimicked them; his warm skin pressed against mine. His complexion was just a touch lighter than mine but without the freckles that were scattered over my body. He was perfect; sculpted muscles flowing over wide shoulders and down to a washboard stomach. The arms positioned beside my head were thick from years of training but there were no scars to mar him; none but that silvery line beneath his right eye. I traced it with a fingertip as he shifted between my legs and then went still.

“I know you think it's a mark of shame,” I whispered to him, “but I only see honor, and it's beautiful to me.”

“Seren,” Tiernan groaned and kissed me again. Little lights appeared in the air around us as I opened my eyes, and I lifted a brow at him. He gave a low chuckle. “I want to see you.”

“No fumbling in the dark like a couple of teenagers?” I teased.

“I haven't been a teenager for a very long time.” He bent his head to my neck and began to nibble and bite the tender flesh there.

“How long exactly?” I asked breathlessly.

“I'm not telling you.” Tiernan laughed and it vibrated against my throat. “You'll only find a way to use it against me.”

“I'm a trained interrogator.” I pushed him over and straddled his waist. His eyes went wide as he stared up at me. “I have ways of making you talk.”

I reached between us and slid him inside me; shivering through the amazing sensation of connecting to him so intimately. I splayed my hands on his chest; feeling his heart beating steady and strong beneath my fingers as I started to move.

“You forget who you're with.” Tiernan grabbed me around the waist, holding me tightly against him, and rolled us so I was beneath him again. With a wicked smile, he pulled his hips back and then drove himself in deep. “I'm a Lord of the Wild Hunt, and I have ways of making you scream.”

Chapter Forty-Four

It took a full day to get to the Seelie Castle. We had to go through another fairy mound; this one was set with silver gates with a stylized sun in the center of them. Beneath the golden sun was a castle that perched high on a hill, the base of which was surrounded by a forest, just like the other gates, but this castle and forest were carved from ivory.

I thought back to when we'd left the Unseelie Kingdom and remembered how the mound we'd traveled through to get there, the one with the golden moon gates, had a different scene entirely on the other side. When we'd returned to Twilight, the gold gates we passed through had a silver star in their center with a silver castle and forest beneath. Just like the door leading from Gentry to Twilight. I was right; the doors were an indication of where the paths led.

It was a few more hours to the Seelie Castle from the rath. We once more pulled off the dirt road early so we could sneak up on foot. Although, there would now be quite a few more of us doing the sneaking. Night would be better for us this time. For one thing, it would help hide both our approach and departure, and for another thing, the entire castle was filled with Seelie, so daylight didn't exactly give us an advantage over them. We waited for dusk and then headed up; leaving Amanda behind with the horses.

I couldn't help but be impressed. The Twilight Castle was stunningly beautiful and the Unseelie was both intimidating and majestic but the Seelie Castle was the fairy tale come to life. It was the castle every child dreamed of when their mother read them bedtime stories. A soaring, shining edifice of pure white stone adorned with gold vines crawling up its sides. Vines so life-like

that I wasn't sure if they were actually golden plants or works of art until I was close enough to touch them and feel the cool metal. The coned tops of the towers were gold too and the largest, most central one was crowned with the same stylized sun that was on the fairy mound gates. It glowed like the real Sun, even in the deepening dark. The Seelie Castle ruled from her throne, high on a lush mountain, beautiful and untouchable like a queen.

Aodh led us through the maze of brambles at the mountain's base and into a narrow passage which cut through the rock. The wards recognized the seelie fairies and we had no trouble getting past them but the tunnel was unlit and unused. Tiernan risked a globe of light and a curving, narrow path was revealed. We headed down it, shushing the excited seelie more than a few times, but despite the echoing voices, we made it up into the castle without incident.

The lower levels of the castle were bright and clean with pearly walls, high ceilings, and cream-colored marble floors. Gold sconces were set at intervals; ensuring that not even a corner was left to wallow in shadow. Not at all like the Unseelie Castle, but that wasn't a huge surprise. We followed Aodh down a corridor and then to a spiraling gold staircase. This was where we said goodbye to the seelie fairies and where I was surprised to receive several hugs and kisses from them.

The seelie had agreed to go up into the main halls and cause as much of a distraction with their appearance as they could so we could escape with the unseelie prisoners. So, as soon as we said goodbye, they hurried up the stairs, and Aodh led Tiernan, Conri, and I to a passage further down the corridor. There, we found another set of stairs but these stairs went down in a straight, diagonal line.

The pristine white stone fell away and bare rock was revealed as we went lower and lower. This passage was well-used and as brightly lit as the rest of the castle, with delicate lanterns hanging from the ceiling every few feet. Our leather-soled boots

padded quietly but quickly down the stairs as the four of us made our way into the seelie dungeon.

I could hear the murmur of voices as we neared the bottom, and I stopped Aodh with a hand on his shoulder. I motioned for him to let me by and he eased back; his wings flattening against the wall so I could pass. As I came to the last corner, I called my magic to hand. I leaned around the edge just enough to see five seelie guards gathered around a baobhan-sith. She was crying, laid out on a table, her wrists and ankles held firmly by four of the men as the final fairy took his pleasure. My jaw clenched, and I had to take a deep breath before I could concentrate enough to blow a cloud of stardust over them.

The baobhan got dusted too, and I couldn't help feeling that it was a small mercy for her. I stormed around the corner and pushed the snoring seelie off her naked body. He slid out of her and fell to the ground; still erect despite his slumber. I almost stomped on that offensive bit of flesh, but Conri was suddenly there; gripping the man by the throat and growling low in his own.

“Conri,” Tiernan whispered harshly. “We don't have time for this.”

“A rapist it the vilest of creatures,” Conri's voice had lowered to a dangerous tone.

“We cannot leave bodies behind, remember?” Tiernan's hand went to Conri's shoulder. “I understand your anger, but the Seelie must not have cause for vengeance.”

“It's evil!” Conri shifted his burning gaze to Tiernan.

“I know and it was done to those seelie we freed as well,” Tiernan said gently. “You don't know how lucky you are to have been raised in the Twilight Court where things like this never happen.”

“I know now,” Conri said gravely and then took a deep

breath. He cast the seelie guard aside violently.

We piled the rest of the half-naked, seelie guards on top of the first one in a rather amusing way and then covered the baobhan-sith as best we could with the torn dress we found beneath her. Conri scooped her up gently, and Aodh took the keys off one of the guards. Then Aodh ran down a long corridor at the end of the room; the keys jangling nervously from his fingers as his wings shivered in agitation.

Tiernan and I rushed behind him; urging the prisoners to be silent as we freed them. They all gave us the same haunted, despairing, and suspicious expressions at first but those expressions slowly started to transform into confusion. They stumbled out of their cells to find Conri waiting for them; cradling the sleeping baobhan-sith in his arms as if she were a child he was carrying to bed. A smattering of hope began to spread over their faces.

A little shellycoat started to weep, his shells clattering as his shoulders shook, and I laid a hand on him gently. He scraped small fists over his swollen eyes, sniffed hard, and then nodded to me curtly. A bean-sidhe came forward and took his hand. She just stared at me silently. She didn't have to say a word; her eyes said it all. She wouldn't even begin to hope until we were safely out of the Seelie Castle. Until then, this could be just another form of torture for her.

“All right,” I said to the gathering. “We have to go back up into the castle before we can go down into the tunnels that will lead us outside. I need you all to be as quiet as possible and help each other as best you can.”

“We will be fine, mistress. Just please, take us from this place,” a little fir darrig answered for the group. His tail was cut down to a stump and his snout was bent at a strange angle, but he lifted his head bravely.

“This way,” Tiernan said and led us up out of the hell hidden beneath the beauty of the Seelie Court.

At the top of the stairs, Aodh turned to me. “Do you remember the way out, Your Highness?”

“Yes, of course.” I nodded and shifted the spriggan I was carrying. He couldn't make it up the stairs with both of his legs broken.

“I'll leave you here then,” Aodh said grimly. “I want to be sure the returning prisoners are enough of a distraction.”

He turned to leave, but I called him back.

“Don't risk yourself any more than you have to, Aodh,” I cautioned.

“I'll be fine.” He smiled at me. “I'll see you back at the Twilight Court as soon as I can get away without causing suspicion.”

“All right,” I agreed, though my stomach knotted with fear for him. “I'll see you soon.”

“Seren, now!” Tiernan snapped as he and Conri herded the unseelie down the corridor toward the secret passage.

“I'm coming,” I snapped back but then we heard a commotion above us, and I turned back to see Aodh running toward the sounds. “Aodh, no!” But he was already gone.

“Damn it, Seren, let's go!”

I ran after Tiernan and into the tunnels; our large group stumbling through the dark until he once more formed a globe of light for us to see by. Those that could, picked up the more injured ones, and we began to race through the narrow passage. We burst out into the night, all of us breathing hard, and caught our breaths for a moment before Tiernan led us down the mountainside to the

hidden carriages.

Then we were once more speeding away from a fairy castle but, thankfully, this time there was no pursuit. I swallowed past the lump in my throat as I urged the horses on; wondering what that meant for Aodh and if I was going to have to tell Nighean and her mother that I'd got him killed.

We made it through the fairy mound and into the Twilight Kingdom, but we continued to ride hard for hours until the horses were too tired to go on. We found a semi-cleared area, far from the road, and made camp for the night.

Conri had to drive Aodh's carriage for him but as soon as we stopped, he was climbing down and throwing open the carriage door to help the freshly-awakened baobhan-sith out. She had awoken in the carriage and been informed of what had transpired by the others but was still a bit unsteady; clutching her dress to her as best she could. Conri gallantly pulled off his tunic and offered it to the baobhan-sith, and she had accepted gratefully; pulling it on over her ruined garment. It hung down to mid-calf on her; making her look like a little girl.

I called for the mending moths, but they were either too tired to come or too far away to hear me, and they didn't answer my call. So, instead, I went among the unseelie and helped them as best I could. I bandaged wounds, set bones, and fed those who couldn't feed themselves. Conri and Tiernan helped too. Tiernan passed out blankets and got the fairies settled while Conri cooked dinner with the remainder of our supplies.

Conri stood over the fire in only his cloak and leather pants, for which I teased him; telling him he looked more like Conan the Barbarian than Conri the Seducer. He laughed, and I kissed his cheek, whispering to him that I knew his secret; he was neither barbarian nor seducer but a true romantic. He had scoffed at that, but I simply pointed at where the baobhan was resting; wrapped in his tunic.

“That is all a part of my diabolical plan to bed her,” he huffed.

“If that were true, you'd be over there right now; wooing her while she was still vulnerable,” I shot back.

“Tell no one of this.” Conri narrowed his eyes at me.

“It will be our secret,” I promised, and he gave me a quick grin.

Then the most miraculous thing happened. Something that restored my faith in humanity as well as in fairykind. Amanda came up to me and offered to help me tend the injured unseelie... and they accepted her help. Seelie, Unseelie, Twilight, and human; we were all just people then, no race or grievance to separate us.

When we had them all settled down for the night, I hugged Amanda and thanked her.

“I can't move past my fear if I don't confront its source and this is probably the safest way for me to do that,” she whispered to me before she headed off to bed.

“Smart girl,” Tiernan said as we watched her curl up in her blanket near the fire.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I need you to take her home tomorrow.”

“Excuse me?” He lifted a brow. “You're insane if you think I'm going to leave you now.”

“My father thinks I'm in the Human Realm, and he'll be expecting me back soon. We need all the time we can get,” I said. “Would you rather I take her back, and you took the unseelie home?”

“Yes, actually,” he growled. “I think that would be safer for you. We'll swing by the mound that leads to Gentry, and you can

take Amanda to the Council. Then they can get her home. I'll have one of the less injured fairies drive your carriage to the Unseelie Castle."

"The Council will have a lot of questions." I sighed.

"So, answer them, Princess." Tiernan smirked and slid his hands around my waist. "You're good with your mouth."

"You're so naughty." I chuckled but then he lowered his face to mine ,and I tried my best to prove his statement true.

Chapter Forty-Five

We were almost to the fairy mound that led to Gentry Technologies when Aodh caught up with us. I've never been so happy to see a fairy in all of my life. I screamed like a little girl when he landed on the seat beside me and then jumped up in delight and nearly fell off the carriage.

“Thank Goddess you're all right,” I declared as I hugged him.

“It's good to see you too, Princess.” Aodh laughed and looked around. “Where are we going?”

“I need to get Amanda home.” I waved toward the clearing Tiernan's coach was just entering. “I'm taking her back through the rath in Gentry Technologies, my father's company.”

“Oh, right, the human girl.” Aodh cast a glance down to the carriage. “Is she all right?”

“I think she will be,” I said confidently. “She's been traumatized, but she's already trying to move past it.” I pulled the horses to a stop and handed the reins to him. “You couldn't have better timing. I need you to drive my carriage to the Unseelie Castle.” Then I saw Tiernan come walking up with Conri, and I shouted down to them, “Hey guys, look who dropped in.” I gave a little giggle, it couldn't be helped.

“Yes, we heard you shrieking like a bean-sidhe.” Tiernan glanced at the carriage behind me. “Apologies, my lady.” He gave a little nod, and I saw a beautiful, pale face disappear back into the shadows of the carriage. Tiernan set his gaze on Aodh. “Your arrival is most fortunate, the Princess is taking the human girl back

to her realm, and we'll need someone to drive her carriage."

"Yes, I've heard," Aodh said, "and you'll be happy to hear that the commotion we heard was simply the Seelie rejoicing for the return of their friends and family members. There is much to celebrate in Seelie today."

"That's a relief." I sighed and opened the carriage door. "Come on, Amanda, we're here."

"I'm really going home?" Amanda crawled out of the carriage with the help of the bean-sidhe, who then kissed her cheek and waved goodbye to her. Amanda waved back before closing the door and turning to me. "She doesn't talk a lot, but she's sweet."

I decided not to tell her that the bean-sidhe's silence had been a courtesy.

"You ready?" I asked, and she nodded. "Okay, one sec." I went to Cat, where she was bridled to the carriage, and took her sleek face in my hands. "I need you to be good for Aodh and help him get to the Unseelie Court and then back home to Twilight safely." Cat huffed and swung her head. "Cat," I chided her. "Please be good, and I'll see you back here..." I turned to look at Tiernan.

"We should be able to get back to the rath in two days, maybe sooner," he said.

"I'll see you in two days, okay?" I asked Cat, and she gave me an annoyed look but nodded her head. "Good girl." I kissed her cheek.

"Do I get a kiss too?" Conri pursed his lips.

"Thank you for your help, Conri." I grabbed his face, turned it, and kissed his cheek.

"She loves me!" Conri smiled big and nodded smugly to

Aodh.

Aodh rolled his eyes and then gave me a cheery smile. “Safe travels, Your Highness.”

“Thank you, Aodh.” I hugged him and moved away with Tiernan.

“Seren”—Tiernan took my hand—“remember to stay on the path.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “I'm the Twilight Star, remember? I'm safe in the in-between.”

“Maybe I should go with you.” He frowned. “You should have a guard with you.”

“I'll be fine, Tiernan.” I shook my head. “I'm going right into Gentry, no one will hurt me there, and then I'm heading straight to the Council House.”

“When you get to Gentry, go to the reception desk and ask for Dylan Thorn. He'll help you and will lend credence to your story of simply going into the Human Realm to see Extinguisher Ewan,” Tiernan urged.

“Oh, okay, good tip,” I agreed.

“And one more thing.” he pulled me close. “Two days and no longer. Don't keep me waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I teased, “just kiss me already.”

Tiernan's kiss was toe-curling, blood-warming, passionate wonderfulness, and I enjoyed every second of it until Conri interrupted.

“I'd be happy to attend you in the Human Realm, Princess Seren,” he called out brightly.

“Thank you, but I'll be fine,” I called back after pulling away from Tiernan.

“Remind me to give Conri a lesson in manners when this is all over,” Tiernan growled.

“Just get those fairies home safely.” I kissed his cheek. “I'll see you soon.”

“All right,” he said and pushed me toward the golden door of the fairy mound. I took Amanda's hand and led her in. Just as I was closing the door behind us, I heard him say, “I love you, Seren.”

I almost fell off the path. Amanda steadied me, and I led her through the in-between. It was a quick journey now that I was used to it, but when we emerged into the bright basement of Gentry, I was still reeling from Tiernan's declaration.

“Did he really just say that?” I whispered to myself.

“Yep, the foxy fairy totally said he loves you.” Amanda laughed.

“Damn, I'm self-centered.” I shook my head and reminded myself why I was there. “Sorry about that. Come on, let's get you as far from Fairy as possible.”

“No biggie.” She grinned radiantly. “I'd be a little shocked too if a guy who looked like him, said that to me.”

“He's very nice looking,” I agreed as I motioned her up the stairs.

“*Nice looking*?” She giggled. “Yeah, in the way that Ian Somerhalder is nice looking.”

“Who?” I asked, and she stopped to stare at me in shock.

“Ian Somerhalder from *Vampire Diaries*,” she huffed.

“Oh sheesh.” I rolled my eyes. “Not another vampire reference.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned.

“Nothing, never mind.” I waved it away. “This Ian guy is hot, huh?”

“Uh, he's *gorgeous*,” she gave me a *duh* tone.

“Okay, good to know. I'll Google him later.”

“Your guy is hotter, though.” Amanda grinned at me over her shoulder.

“Thanks.” I leaned around her to push the door open and bring us out into the second floor.

Then I froze because the room was full of people, and they all stopped working to stare at us. Correction; it was full of fairies. I gave a little laugh and smiled brightly.

“Hi there, does anyone know where I can find Dylan Thorn?” I asked with forced gaiety.

They gaped at me some more but then, finally, a guy near the back jumped up and ran off; hopefully to fetch Dylan. I edged toward the elevator with Amanda; momentarily forgetting that this was my father's company, and I wasn't in any danger there. I guess my trips into the other courts had left their mark. Or maybe being in the Human Realm again made my Extinguisher training emerge. Whatever it was, I pressed the button and got us into the elevator before anyone could move toward us.

“Tell him to meet us at reception,” I called out as the doors closed.

“That was awkward,” Amanda said.

“And totally stupid.” I rolled my eyes. “This is my father's

business. All of those fairies work for him so we weren't in any danger."

"They were *all fairies*?" She gaped at me.

"Uh, yeah." I chewed at my lip. I hadn't thought of how to handle Amanda's knowledge of the Fey. "Look, it could be dangerous for you to talk about fairies. I'm going to take you to the Human Council, and they'll be able to help you get back home and sort things out but they're probably going to tell you the same thing; you need to pretend that you don't know anything about the Fey."

"Trust me, I want this all to just go away," she said. "I'm not going to cause any problems. Besides, who's going to believe me? They'd lock me up in the loony bin."

"Great." I grinned as we exited the elevator and headed toward the reception desk. "I mean about your not talking, not the loony bin part."

Sunlight poured in from the wall of windows; blending with the artificial light shed by the abundance of ceiling lamps to create an almost blinding environment. A steady stream of people bustled through the large room; not at all bothered by the extreme brightness. I inhaled sharply when a passing fairy caught my eye and waved a hand toward his own eyes with a pointed look. Oh, crap, my eyes. I gave him a grateful smile and blinked away the stars; covering them up with glamour. He nodded his approval and started to move past but then suddenly stopped and stared at the top of my head.

"Your Highness," he whispered and bowed deeply before moving on.

"What the hell?" I gaped at his back. "How did he know?"

"What was with that guy?" Amanda asked.

“I have no idea.” I frowned and then remembered my eyes. It must have been the stars. If he worked for my father, he'd know about Keir's eyes. I shrugged at Amanda, not wanting to take the time to explain.

We maneuvered through the crowd and finally reached the reception desk; a shining curve of snowy marble topped with glass. There was a tall, ebony-haired man waiting in front of it; pointedly ignoring the adoring looks he was getting from the receptionist. His hair was cut fashionably short; sweeping back from his high forehead in tousled layers, his suit was obviously expensive; fitting his broad shoulders and narrow waist perfectly, and his sapphire eyes, though stunning, looked completely normal. Except he wasn't normal; he was a fairy.

“Dylan Thorn?” I asked, and he smiled slowly; his aura flashing with sparks of deep emerald.

“Sweet Seren.” He opened his arms and enveloped me in a hug. Then he whispered, “What are you doing here alone and unguarded? We've only just recovered from the Sluagh attack.”

“I know.” I pulled away. “I had to bring Amanda home.” I gestured to her. “Amanda, this is Dylan Thorn. He works for my father.”

“Hey.” Amanda nodded at him but her expression was wary.

“Nice to meet you,” he said stiffly and moved us away from the reception desk. Then under his breath, he said, “Come with me, Your Highness.”

“I need to take Amanda to the Human Council,” I whispered to him.

“Yes, I assumed as much.” Dylan glanced at her as he led us through a door marked *parking* and then down some stairs. “Where did you find her?”

“In an unseelie dungeon,” I said grimly.

“What?” He stopped and looked back at us. “You went into the Unseelie Court? Into their *dungeons*?!”

“Yeah, and you're not going to tell my father about it because it could cause irreparable damage.” I smiled grimly. I failed to mention that the damage would be to my ass, which Keir would no doubt lay the smackdown on.

“I barely know you, and I already dislike you.” He sighed deeply. “Very well, come with me. I'll drive her to the Council House myself.”

“Us, you mean,” I clarified. “I can't go back to Fairy for a couple of days so I'm going to stay at the Council House.”

“Oh, is *that* where you're going to stay?” He scoffed. “No, I don't think so. It's hardly suitable accommodations for the Twilight Princess.”

“You're the *Twilight* Princess?” Amanda nearly shrieked in glee.

“I hate that title.” I grimaced at her. “Please, no jokes.”

“Oh, my God, that's the most awesome title ever!” Amanda laughed. “Do you sparkle?”

“Shut up, Amanda,” I growled.

“Do you have pointy teeth? Can you run super fast?” She kept going. “Do you know Robert Pattinson?”

“Now, that doesn't even make any sense.” I turned to shake my head at her, but she just shrugged.

“Who is Robert Pattinson?” Dylan asked, and Amanda shrieked again.

“Are you kidding me?!” She gaped at us. “What's wrong with you people? Don't you ever watch movies?”

“*I* do, but I'm not sure about him.” I looked Dylan over critically and shot his words back at him. “I barely know him, and I already dislike him.”

“I don't have time for entertainment.” Dylan was barely holding it together. “I have to handle all the issues that come up here... like a princess showing up with a human girl she stole from the Unseelie.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” I shrugged in a way that conveyed how *not* sorry I was. “Tiernan said I should ask for you.”

“Oh, he did, did he?” Dylan opened a door at the bottom of the stairwell, and we all filed into an underground garage. “How do you know Count Shadowcall?”

“He's my boyfriend,” I said flippantly, and Dylan lifted a perfect black brow.

I admit, it felt good to say it, if a little silly. I mean what does a fairy princess call the guy she's sleeping with? Her lover? Her consort? That just sounded even sillier.

“Your *what*?” Dylan asked.

“Her boyfriend,” Amanda said slowly as if he were stupid. “You know”—she started making kissing sounds—“the guy she makes out with.”

“Wow, I think I overestimated your age.” I looked her over.

“I'm sixteen,” she whined. “I was just teasing the stuffed suit.”

“What did you call me?” Dylan leaned toward Amanda aggressively.

“All right, enough teasing everyone.” I held up my hands. “Let's just get the child home, okay?”

“I'm not a child,” she whined again.

“The teenager,” I clarified, and she pouted. “The young woman?”

“That's better.” Amanda nodded.

“Well, now that you're happy with *your* title.” I rolled my eyes and gestured to Dylan. “Can we go?”

“Sure,” he huffed. “Why not? I aim to please. I am but a mere servant to the whims of my princess.”

“Excellent.” I ignored his sarcasm, and he grimaced.

Dylan pressed a button on his key fob and a sleek, black sports car beeped. I sighed. Did none of these guys understand the convenience of an SUV? We all piled in. Amanda slid into the back happily, stretching out across the leather seats, while I sat in the front next to the stuffed suit. Then Dylan sped out of the garage with a squeal of rubber. We came out into the San Francisco sunlight, and I smiled; a part of me was very happy to be back.

Chapter Forty-Six

“Once more, if you please.” Councilman Murdock was back to sitting across a tea set from me in the parlor of the San Francisco Council House.

“I can't give you specifics, Councilman,” I said. “Just please help Amanda get home; she's been through a lot.”

“Of course, we'll help her,” he huffed. “But you said you rescued her from the Unseelie. Isn't there something we can do?”

“Not unless you'd like to storm the Unseelie Castle.” Dylan grimaced. “There's nothing that even we can do about it, Mr. Murdock. Princess Seren has done more than any fairy monarch has ever done concerning this situation. The idea that anyone could try and hold the entire Unseelie Court accountable for the abduction of one human girl is, frankly, laughable.”

“*Councilman* Murdock not Mr.,” Murdock corrected in irritation; probably because he couldn't fault anything else Dylan had said.

“Ah.” Dylan narrowed his eyes at Murdock and then waved a hand at himself. “Duke Dylan Thorn... of the *Unseelie*.”

Murdock swallowed roughly and stammered, “My apologies, Your Grace.”

“Duke?” I looked over at Dylan. “Who are you?”

“I'm your uncle, Seren.” Dylan winked at me. “Your *other* unseelie uncle; the handsome one.” He grinned. “Also known as the Defector of the Dark Court and, rather ironically, the Unseelie Heir.”

“You're my uncle?” I stared harder at him and as I watched, he lowered his glamour.

Dylan's skin paled to pure white, the angles of his face sharpened, and his eyes darkened to a shimmering, deep cerulean. Then that blue bled out into the whites of his eyes until they were completely saturated. The black pupils remained at their centers, almost tricking you into believing they were still normal.

“Oh wow,” I whispered. “Yeah, I see the resemblance now.”

“Yes, I've heard you had an unfortunate introduction to our kin,” Dylan said.

“I'm sorry, Your Grace,” Murdock interrupted, “but can we get back to the matter at hand?”

“Please.” Dylan waved his hand elegantly, and I saw even more of Uisdean in him. Another wave of his hand and the glamour was back in place; he was just a normal guy once more.

“The Fairy Council has contacted us and informed us that they would like to make you a sort of peace-keeping ambassador between the realms,” Murdock directed his attention at me. “You would have their full support, as well as ours of course, to continue your work as an extinguisher in the Realm of Fairy. This would mean that if we needed to pursue a fairy back into that realm, we could simply call on you to apprehend the criminal. Or, if you uncovered any unlawful activity, you could report it to either council and then would be given instructions on how to handle the matter.”

“I could report it?” I lifted a brow.

“Well, we want to be kept apprised of things,” Murdock said. “The Fairy Council claims that they have assigned Count Tiernan to assist you. You will be the first Extinguisher to partner with a Lord of the Wild Hunt. It's very exciting, and we've only

just begun to scratch the surface of what you two could accomplish together. What do you think, Extinguisher Seren?"

"I think you've got yourself a peace-keeping ambassador." I grinned.

"Excellent!" Murdock clapped his hands. "There's a few things we'd like to go over with you. Do you need to return to Fairy immediately or will you be staying awhile?"

"I'll be here a couple of days," I said.

"Good, we can put you up in a suite near Amanda's if you'd like," Murdock offered.

"The Princess will be staying in the royal apartments," Dylan interrupted.

"Sorry, Sir," I said to Murdock. "The price of nobility. My uncle is being very stubborn about propriety."

"Because you get into too much trouble when left to your own devices, Your Highness," Dylan ground out.

"Yeah, that's valid." I grimaced.

"I will wait here while you have your discussion," Dylan said graciously; living up to his title.

"Thanks," I said with a little suspicion.

"You're family," he said. "I have to make sure you're safe, little niece."

"Are you sure you're King Uisdean's brother?" I teased.

"Yes"—he smiled gently—"but I am also King Keir's brother."

Okay, I was starting to like the guy.

Chapter Forty-Seven

The entire San Francisco Human Council convened to speak with me. It was a little intimidating to be the center of their attention, especially since that attention was pretty damn intense. They had already been a meeting to discuss the possibilities of my new diplomatic status, and they had made notes, lists, and even graphs of how they saw my role playing out. Graphs! Damn politicians.

I sat through most of the political BS with what I thought was a fair amount of poise; nodding my head in acceptance of the standard expectations they had for me: keeping the peace, carrying out execution warrants, that sort of thing. But when they started in on all the diplomatic duties I'd have to perform, I began to get nervous. I hadn't thought about all the parties I'd have to attend as both an ambassador and a princess. Or all the meetings I'd have to conduct with the fairy royals. The thought of sitting down to have a nice diplomatic discussion with my Uncle Uisdean was a little terrifying.

“We understand that meeting with King Uisdean will be stressful for you,” Murdock added when he saw my expression. “No one expects you to return to Unseelie without taking proper security measures, but fostering communications between us and all the courts of Fairy is part of the job of an ambassador. The Fairy Council has also requested that you perform a similar function for them; serving as a mediator between the Courts.”

“What exactly do you think *proper security measures* would be?” I asked them all with a slow and careful tone.

“I'd imagine you would take a company of guards with you,

Your Highness.” Rachel Forester, one of the council members recruited from outside the five great families, had flat out refused to drop the honorifics.

I think she was doing it to annoy me; we'd been on bad terms ever since I'd called her the C word during my reappointment hearing... otherwise known as the hearing that got me and my father exiled to Hawaii.

“You'd imagine that, huh?” I lifted a brow as my poise disappeared. “Could you also imagine being forced to eat dinner while an unseelie man raped a seelie woman and then beat her so badly that she should have died? Could you imagine sitting there, trying not to vomit because you know that the only reason she didn't die is that she's immortal and that immortality has doomed her to an eternity of such torment? Do you think a company of guards would make a difference in that situation?”

The table went silent.

“Oh, but I'm sure at least a few of you have visited the Unseelie Court,” I said casually. “You must know exactly what I'm talking about. What proper security measures did you take?”

“I fear the Unseelie were a bit more free with their... entertainments when you were in their custody, Seren.” Murdock cleared his throat. “Perhaps you could meet at a neutral location?”

“I'll see what I can do,” I said noncommittally. See, I could be a politician too. All that was required was an ability make vague promises.

“This discovery of a whole court previously unknown to us has brought up numerous questions which we hoped you could help answer, Extinguisher Seren.” Councilman Ray Teagan, the youngest council person there, had no problem dropping my title. He also had no problem laying on the charm when he had a goal in mind. He smiled at me sweetly; immediately setting off warning bells in my head.

“What questions are those?” I asked carefully.

“Well.” Teagan looked around the table at the other council members and then back at me. I'd been placed to the right of Murdock, who was at the head of the table, and Teagan was just a few seats down on our left. “First of all, we'd like to know more about this Twilight Court. What it looks like, what kind of fairies are a part of it, what its politics are, things of that nature.”

“Any information I give you must be approved by King Keir first.” I narrowed my eyes at him. “I believe he's already released some sort of statement.”

“Yes.” Teagan smiled wider; flashing obviously-whitened teeth at me. “But it was very vague. Perhaps you could elaborate.”

“Perhaps you could write down your questions, and I'll take them to the Twilight King for him to review... as I would any other fairy king.” I shot a side look at Murdock, but he just shrugged.

“Extinguisher Seren,” Teagan was still using his charming voice but I could tell his patience was wearing thin. “You are firstly a human, aren't you? Your allegiance is owed to us.”

“Hmm,” I pretended to consider his words. “Would it be fair to say that you are predominantly of Irish descent, Councilman Teagan?”

“Yes.” He frowned.

“Do you owe your allegiance to Ireland?” I lifted a brow.

“Of course not.” He chuckled. “I owe my allegiance to this council, as do you, Seren.”

“But you cited my human blood as your reasoning for that,” I pointed out.

“Well, we are the *Human* Council,” he offered, and the other council members chuckled.

“Yes, you are,” I agreed, “but you're also Irish, as we all are. So, shouldn't our allegiance be to the *Dublin* Council House?”

They went quiet again. The Human Council was composed of several smaller councils spread all over the world. Each region had their own house and, as was the case with most large groups which have been divided into smaller ones, the Council Houses had become loyal to themselves first and then to the Human Council as a whole. To suggest that a member of the San Francisco Council House should, in fact, be loyal to the Dublin Council House, was a sort of slap in the face.

“I don't see the relevance, Extinguisher,” Teagan growled, all charm evaporating.

“Yet you seem to clearly see where *my* loyalties should lie and to what degree.” I leaned toward him, over the table. “Let me make something very clear to all of you. I want to continue as an extinguisher. I want to help keep the peace between the fairies and the humans. I want to help as much as I can, but I will not be bullied into choosing a side. The whole point of this is that I'm neutral. I'm equally human and fairy. I can't perform the role of an ambassador for both sides if I'm secretly supporting only one. And, frankly, Councilman Teagan, if I were to choose a side right now, the Fey are looking a lot more attractive to me.”

“All right, let's all take a breath.” Murdock held up his hand and gave Teagan a warning look when he started to speak. “We want you to be neutral, Seren, but we also can't help wanting to know more about the Fairy Realm. There has obviously been a lot of information withheld from us. A whole kingdom was kept secret. This is big. We're curious; it's human nature to be curious, isn't it?” He gave me a little smile.

“Yes, curiosity is human nature and it's also what killed the cat. There are things humans don't tell the Fey either. Everyone has their secrets and some secrets are best left hidden. Some secrets, if they were revealed, would give you such nightmares that you'd

never be able to sleep again," I said. "Look, I'll tell you what I believe my father would approve of me sharing."

"Which father is that, Extinguisher?" Teagan said in a low voice, and sharp inhalations circled the table.

"My *biological* one," I said, without missing a beat. "Councilman, I've hunted fairies for most of my life; beings *far* superior to you in their magical and physical combat abilities. Your *words* are not going to hurt me. They may piss me off, but at the end of the day, that will only hurt *you*. Because if you piss me off enough, I will walk away from this whole thing with a *fuck you* and a smile."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Teagan growled.

"Councilman Teagan, that is enough!" Murdock shouted as he stood and glared down at the younger man.

"If she wants to remain an extinguisher, she must adhere to the rules and respect this council." Teagan transferred his ire to Murdock.

"We all know this is a special situation, Teagan," Murdock snapped. "You're behaving like a child and an amateur councilman. We do not insult fairy monarchs!" He shook his head. "If *she* wants to remain an extinguisher? It's *we* who want her with us, and it's *us* who need this alliance. Princess Seren has been good enough to agree to this new role... out of loyalty to *us*, and you are trying to demean and criticize her for it. Well, let me make myself clear now that the Princess has given us clarity on her intentions. She outranks you. She outranks *all* of you, and you will *all* speak to her with the respect due to both her station and the sacrifices she is offering to make for this council. She has been kind in allowing us to be informal, due to our previous relationship with her, but that ends right now. She is *Princess* or *Your Highness* or even *Ambassador* if you can't manage the first two, and if you have a problem with that, you are welcome to leave because not only does

she outrank you, but she outweighs you in her worth to this council!"

Teagan got up and stormed out, which didn't surprise me. He had too much ego to stay after being told that I was more important than him. Murdock simply nodded, smoothed his lapels, and sat back down with a satisfied air. I guess he didn't like Teagan either, but then it's hard to like a young, attractive know-it-all who thinks he's better than you.

"Well, that trumps my *fuck you and a smile* speech," I huffed, and nervous laughter circled the table.

"Princess Seren," Murdock began again, "we will appreciate any information you're willing to share with us about Fairy and would hope that you'd show the same amount of discretion for our information when you're dealing with the Fairy Council."

I saw several council members flinch; wide eyes betraying the fact that they hadn't thought of it from the reverse. If I'd been willing to betray the Fey, what would have stopped me from betraying the humans? There was a reason why Murdock was in charge.

"Of course." I gave him a secret smile. "As I said, I am equally human and Fey. I will treat both sides as fairly as possible."

"That's all we can ask for," Murdock said. "Now, let's see if we can find some middle ground."

Finding that middle ground took a couple of hours. When I finally left the council chamber, I found Uncle Dylan asleep on the couch where I'd left him. He had his arms flung out to the sides, across the back of the couch, and his head was leaned so far back that his mouth dropped open a little; a prime pose for snoring. Unfortunately, my Uncle Dylan was too perfect to snore and slept peacefully without a single sound. I shook his shoulder, and he

even woke up peacefully; his body gracefully shifting back into an upright position as he opened his eyes and placed them unerringly on me.

“We can go now.” I looked over his tired eyes. “Thanks for waiting for me.”

“It's quite all right.” He gave me a sleep-softened smile. “You're my blood.”

“You know, you're not half bad for a relative of mine,” I joked as we headed out to the car.

I was surprised to see that there was still a bit of daylight left. It had felt as if I'd been in with the council forever.

“I'll take that as high praise,” he said and chuckled. “Our relatives can be... trying.”

“Oh.” I burst into laughter. “Yeah, they can be trying all right; as in trying to kill me all the time.”

“Ah, correction, sweet niece”—he grinned and opened the car door for me—“they *used* to be trying to kill you, now they only want to imprison, rape, and perhaps impregnate you.”

“Oh, that's just...” I shook my head. “Eew, okay, eeewww. I can't even imagine having that idiot's baby.”

“Bress *is* rather intolerable.” Dylan shut the door and climbed into the driver's seat.

“He's also insane,” I added.

“Yes, but that's not so uncommon among fey royalty.” He slid a grim look my way.

“Oh, yay,” I said with thick sarcasm. “There's something I can look forward to. Insanity makes everything more fun.”

Dylan drove me through the city and up to a soaring, shiny apartment building; all steel and glass. We went through a secure side entrance to the garage and then used a keycard to get into the building itself. I wasn't surprised when he slid the card into a panel in the elevator and pushed the button for the penthouse, but I was surprised when the elevator opened directly onto the suite... suites... whatever, we had the entire top floor.

“Nice view.” I went to the floor-to-ceiling windows which had sliding glass doors set into them and led out to the balcony.

I went out onto the pristine, white stone balcony and lifted a brow at the plethora of potted plants crowding it.

“Fairies.” Dylan came out behind me. “We need a bit of nature to feel comfortable around all this metal and man-made stone.”

“Ah.” I nodded and looked out over the bay.

There was a perfect view of both bay and bridge. The sun was shimmering off the Golden Gate, dropping toward the horizon. We had maybe twenty minutes until sunset... twilight. I was becoming more and more attuned to the moment twilight arrived, and I wondered if someday I'd be able to know the exact second it would occur.

“How about a drink?” Dylan asked and headed back inside.

“Sure,” I agreed, “maybe we could order some food? I'm starving.”

“Absolutely,” Dylan called to me from the kitchen, which shared an open space with the living room.

The living room had wall-to-wall gray carpeting, kind of a modern and depressing color, but the vivid crimson furniture set out over it made the carpet fade into obscurity. I went to one of the overstuffed couches and took a seat; staring around me at all the

luxury I was still getting used to. Sleeping in a fairy castle was amazing but it was also like a dream, kind of surreal. Seeing the wealth Keir had in the Human Realm was a little more tangible to me and therefore more impressive.

The windows made it seem as if the room were open to the sky and also made it feel more massive somehow. There was an elaborate chandelier hanging from the middle of the ceiling and directly beneath it was a large terrarium. I found myself staring at the intricate placement of all the micro plants within the glass box. Some of the taller ones grew up over the sides and hung over the edge. I followed the draping leaves down to the terrarium's base... which was a large aquarium.

I angled my head down to see the tiny fish swimming over black pebbles and through a drapery of lacey roots. Then I leaned up and over the thing to get a better view of the center of the terrarium which was free of plants; like a miniature forest surrounding a lake. Little fish mouths broke the surface of the lake to kiss the air. I smiled at the brilliance of the thing and wondered if I could talk Keir into making me one for my room back in Fairy.

“Here you are.” Dylan handed me a champagne flute full of sparkling golden liquid and then took a seat beside me.

“Thank you.” I pondered him a moment. “Why is your name Dylan?”

“Pardon me?” He jerked.

“Everyone I've met has unusual names,” I said. “A lot of Gaelic going around the Fairy Realm. But you get Dylan? It seems odd.”

“I changed my name when I left the Unseelie Court,” he said tonelessly.

“Oh, I'm sorry I brought it up,” I said softly.

“It's perfectly fine, Seren.” He gave me a strained smile. “I made my own decisions.”

“This place is incredible,” I changed the subject and looked around again; noticing two doors on my left and a third to the right of the kitchen. “How many rooms are there?”

“On this floor?” Dylan asked, and I just blinked at him. “There are two bedrooms, two baths, this social room here, and your father's office is through there.” He gestured to the door beside the kitchen. “Then there are stairs near the elevator which go down one level to a security center which includes a living space for our guards.”

“Right, security is important.” I saluted him with my glass and took a sip.

It was good; slightly sweet, with an aftertaste of cherries. I rubbed my tongue on the roof of my mouth to savor it and then took another sip. When I lowered the glass, I found Dylan staring at me intently. I put the glass down on a side table and stared back.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Things are about to happen that you will not understand, and I'm sorry for that,” he said grimly.

“What did you do?” I looked from my abandoned glass to his guilty face.

There was a creeping lethargy seeping into my limbs. I couldn't lift my hands or focus enough to use either my psychic or magical talents. I started to slide down the back of the couch.

“It will wear off soon, I promise,” Dylan whispered as he caught me and laid me down gently. “You're going to be okay, Seren.”

“You traitor,” I whispered while I could still speak.

“Technically, I'm a double agent,” he clarified. “I was a traitor when I left the Unseelie Court; this is redemption.”

A ringing came from a panel near the elevator, and Dylan glanced over his shoulder at it. Then he looked back at me sadly, gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek, and got up to go to the intercom. He pushed a button on it and spoke quickly. Then he went to the elevator and pushed a button there before he turned to face me once more.

“This will all be over soon.” He smiled reassuringly. “Try not to upset yourself.”

I wanted to tell him to go to hell, but I couldn't move my tongue. It felt swollen in my mouth and my body was extremely heavy. The elevator dinged and the doors opened to reveal my other uncle, King Uisdean. He had his hair pulled back in a thick braid which hung down his back and a pair of sunglasses over his eyes. That, in combination with his black suit, made him look almost human, but then his evil smile chased the illusion away.

“You had no trouble coming through?” Dylan asked as he took Uisdean's coat.

“None at all.” Uisdean removed his sunglasses and spared a glance at the darkening sky outside. “Perfect timing, Brother. Night comes, and I'll be able to whisk this one back to Fairy with no one the wiser.”

“That's precisely what I thought,” Dylan said. “We could have waited for full night, but that would have been risky. Better to take her as soon as possible.”

“Yes, you're right.” Uisdean walked forward; keeping his dark stare on me. “You have much to answer for, Princess Seren. It seems that my dungeons have been emptied and now I'll have to find new occupants for them. You shall be the first.”

I would have shivered if I wasn't paralyzed but all I could

manage was a blink, and I didn't even want to do that. I had a feeling that taking my eyes off Uisdean for even a second could be disastrous.

"There was one thing I was wondering," Dylan said as he casually sat in a sleek, cherry-colored chair on my right. "How did you get the Sluagh past our wards?"

"You're not the only fairy who came looking to strike a bargain with me." Uisdean grinned, finally taking his disturbing eyes off me to look over at Dylan.

"You have a spy in Gentry?" Dylan lifted his brows.

"Middle management." Uisdean laughed. "It's always those in the middle who want to advance by any means possible."

"Who?" Dylan frowned. "I personally vetted all of our employees."

"Adam Driscol is his human name." Uisdean gave a little frown. "I can't remember his fairy name for the life of him.

"The phrase is *for the life of me,*" Dylan corrected with a little laugh.

"Oh, no, Brother, it's not." Uisdean smiled back. "*My* life is never in danger."

Then twilight came and the magic burned through me; dissolving the effects of the drug Dylan had slipped me. I blinked in surprise but kept still so I wouldn't give away the fact that I could move again. I glanced over at Dylan and saw him wink at me. What the hell? Before I could even form a plan, one of the doors to my left burst open, and Keir came striding through.

He was dressed for battle; in leather armor stained deep purple, heavy black boots, and a sword strapped to his belt. His hair was braided back and folded up into a neat club. He barely

spared me a look as I sat up in shock, just slammed into Uisdean and knocked him to the floor. Uisdean stared up at Keir with wide eyes as Keir's fist pummeled his face. Then Keir was thrown off the Unseelie King with a burst of darkness which exploded between them.

Keir didn't even fall, just landed back on his feet to stare at Uisdean with eyes glowing brightly. Every time he blinked, it was like the twinkle of stars. Angry stars. Keir lifted his hand, and Uisdean slid across the floor; slamming into the metal doors of the elevator hard enough to dent them. I got to my feet and would have helped, but Dylan grabbed my arm.

“This is a father's revenge,” Dylan said calmly; keeping his eyes on the fighting fairies, “and a lover's. Just keep out of the way, Seren.”

“You're *not* a traitor?” I stared at him in shock.

“As I said before.” He spared me a quick grin, “I'm a double agent. Fuck Uisdean, he's an evil son of a bargest.”

“Oh, I like that.” I smiled fully. “Cause a bargest is like a dog. Good one.”

“Yes, Seren.” Dylan rolled his eyes. “Now, just be a good girl and watch your father kick your uncle's ass.”

Dylan was right, Keir *was* kicking Uisdean's ass. Uisdean was already bleeding from several places when he threw out a hand; magic rippling through the air to hit Keir. Keir screamed, and I started to go forward but, again, Dylan stopped me. I yanked my arm out of his grip angrily as I saw the reason for Keir's screams; black thorns were poking through his skin everywhere.

“Dad!” I cried.

“Stay back, Seren!” Keir waved a hand over himself and the thorns fell away. “I am the Twilight King, I can handle my

brother.”

“Can you?” Uisdean growled and lifted his hand.

“You know I can... or you will know, soon enough.” Keir grinned maliciously, and I saw Uisdean's smile falter, his eyes filling with terror.

“You can't kill me, Brother!” Uisdean cried as Keir gestured and magic rushed between them. “This is not a war!”

Uisdean screamed, a high pitiful sound, as he fell to the carpet and began to shake. His pale skin reddened and rolled as if there were bubbles beneath it. I gaped as blood poured from his ears in a boiling tide and sizzled when it hit his hair. The acrid smell of burnt hair and blood wafted over to me.

Keir walked slowly over to his brother and stood over him; watching as the blood flow slowed and Uisdean's screams mellowed into whimpers. The hair at his temples was mostly gone but what was left was thick with blood and smoldering. There were even holes in his suit where blood had dripped and wounds all over his skin where it had burned through the flesh.

“That's the magic His Majesty inherited from your grandmother,” Dylan whispered with a note of awe. “Bloodburn.”

“Jesus,” I whispered.

“Even more powerful than he,” Dylan said smugly.

“That is for killing Catriona and for sending the Sluagh after my daughter.” Keir glared coldly at his brother. “I was born to be neutral, Uisdean, to keep the peace and watch over both courts, but I have been too gentle it seems. You've forgotten what I am capable of and so you will now remember, and you will only call on the Sluagh in times of great need, as the law dictates.”

“Yes, Brother,” Uisdean's voice was gurgling and grudging

but also resigned. He stumbled to his feet and faced Keir proudly, even though he looked like a plague victim. “You're right, that was... unwise of me. Yet know that I only sought to save you from yourself. A human on the Twilight throne is a blasphemy, an affront to the Goddess!”

I walked over to Uisdean and snarled in his face, “I vowed to myself that I would find my mother's killer and extinguish him, but I can't kill you so this is going to have to do for now.”

I punched him in the nose with all of my strength and had the extreme satisfaction of feeling his bones break beneath my knuckles. Uisdean shook his head like a boxer shakes off a blow, blood spraying out to stain the white walls, and then started forward.

“The Goddess speaks to her, Uisdean.” Keir stepped between us and smiled when Uisdean jerked back in shock. Twilight deepened into night and Keir's expression softened. “Danu speaks *through* her. Seren has her protection and her favor. *Look* at her, Brother! She wears the crown.”

“What?” Uisdean shot a horrified look at me. His gaze intensified and he swallowed roughly. “No, it's not possible.”

“When is the last time you felt Danu's presence?” Keir cocked his head at his brother and then wandered over to the couch and took a seat.

He gestured to me and Dylan, and we followed suit. I knew immediately that it was meant to be a final insult. None of us feared the Unseelie King.

“I...” Uisdean wandered over to a chair across from us and fell back into it. “I don't remember.”

“I felt her just this morning.” Keir stroked a hand over my hair. “You're not the only one she guides, Seren. Remember that the next time you think to operate without my knowledge.”

“You knew about the prisoners?” I gaped at him.

“I am the King of Twilight.” He chuckled. “The Seelie have the day and the Unseelie own the night but the spaces between are mine... *ours*... and although they are just brief flashes of time, the power of night and day combine and condense within them. When we stand against our enemies during those moments, no one can defeat us.”

“Whoa,” I whispered. “You're not mad about me rescuing the prisoners?”

“I'm mad that you felt I wasn't worthy of your trust.” Keir sighed. “But freeing them was the right thing to do. I've stood by silently for too long; believing that being the King of Twilight meant dividing Dark from Light and keeping them from declaring war. I've completely lost sight of the true reason I was birthed; to bring peace, not just a wary truce. We are peacekeepers, Seren, and law keepers.”

“I thought the Sluagh punished criminals?” I frowned.

“They kill murderers of monarchs,” Keir corrected, “but their main purpose is to defend the Unseelie Court when it is in dire need. Just as the Seelie have the Shining Ones.”

“Wait, what?” I gaped at him.

“I bet you thought we were *all* the Shining Ones,” Uisdean sneered at me, “and you, the extinguisher of our light.”

“*Brother*,” Keir made the word into a warning.

“Teach her then.” Uisdean waved a hand indolently at me. He was sure recovering quickly, or at least his attitude was. His skin was still covered in open sores, although they'd stopped bleeding.

“I am attempting to do just that.” Keir gave Uisdean one

last quelling look and then nodded to Dylan.

“Your Majesty.” Dylan stood and motioned to Uisdean. “I believe your car is waiting?”

“Very well.” Uisdean stood and smirked at Keir. “You've made your point, Twilight King. I will follow our law more closely in the future... and I will never underestimate you again.”

Dylan escorted Uisdean to the elevator, handed him his coat, and stood there until the doors closed over Uisdean's dark expression. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You jackass!” I shot to my feet and punched Dylan in the shoulder. “You had me thinking you were a traitorous jerk.”

“Don't blame me.” Dylan held out his hands in surrender. “It was your father's idea.”

“Dad,” I ground out.

“Sit down, Seren.” Keir narrowed his eyes at me. “You don't get to be angry after the stunt you pulled.”

“You just said you approved of my stunt,” I huffed and sat back down.

“But not about being kept in the dark.” He gave a little laugh at the pun. “Do you want to hear about the true Shining Ones?”

“Oh.” I blinked. “Yeah, I do.”

“They are the Seelie equivalent of the Sluagh,” Keir said in a low tone. “Beings so powerful and deadly that they are called upon only in desperate times.”

“Who are they?” I whispered the question.

“The Sluagh are the cursed ones,” Keir said simply, “and so

the Shining Ones are the blessed. They are pure light, pure energy, and all Fey have the right to join them upon their death."

"Fairy spirits?" I asked, and he nodded. "I thought those were the will-o-wisps."

"That's just a story we tell our children." Keir shook his head. "The wisps are fire elementals. The Shining Ones are fairy spirits, but they are not *individual* spirits. They are the gathered energy of all the fey who have died but who have chosen to stay and serve their people. This energy is collected and transformed into new beings. They are the honorable dead made into warriors of light."

"Even the Unseelie can join them?" I asked with wide eyes.

"Even the Unseelie." He nodded. "The Shining Ones can unite with the Sluagh when the realm itself is threatened, and that's where we come in."

"How so?" A shiver raced over my skin.

"We are the ones who unite them and then command them." Keir smiled and took my hand. "Your birth was not an accident, Seren. You were born as I was, with a purpose. Do you think it was pure chance that I, the King of Twilight, should sire a child with an extinguisher? No, your birth was fated. You are meant to bring peace not only between the Courts of Light and Dark but also between the realms of Human and Fairy."

"So, no pressure then," I whispered, and Dylan burst into laughter.

"She has your wit," Dylan said to Keir.

"Yes, and her mother's fortitude." Keir grinned proudly. "Goddess help us."

Chapter Forty-Eight

There was no need for me to wait another day before returning to Fairy since Keir could take me straight home. Home. Funny that the place I called home was now in the Fairy Realm. We left shortly after Uisdean did; Dylan to fire and do who knows what else to Adam Driscol while Keir and I went back to Gentry Technologies so we could use his personal fairy mound to get back to the Twilight Kingdom.

A coach and a contingent of soldiers were waiting for us when we exited the rath. They were all sitting around a fire but there were no tents up so I assumed they expected it to be a short wait. Which meant Keir had perfectly timed his arrival into the Human Realm. I guess Danu did speak to him.

The knights were well trained, Keir's personal retinue, the King's Guard, and they were mounted and ready to leave within moments. Soon, we were rumbling through the night-shrouded forest on our way to the Twilight Court. I sat back against the purple velvet seats and sighed deeply; going over the last few days in my mind.

“Could you send someone to intercept Tiernan so he doesn't ride all the way back to the mound to wait for me?” I asked Keir as we sped home.

“It's already been done,” Keir said. “He will be waiting for you at Castle Twilight.”

“You're way ahead of me it seems.” I shook my head.

“Well, I have a few centuries more experience than you, Daughter.” He winked at me.

“I do need to return to HR and try to speak to my Dad again.” I sighed and focused my attention on the strange scenery outside the window which was becoming less and less strange every day.

“HR?” Keir asked.

“Oh, I mean the Human Realm,” I explained and looked back at him. He had a careful expression on his face, and I recognized it as the one he always wore when I talked about Ewan. “We Extinguishers tend to call it HR and Fairy is FR.”

“Ah, of course.” He gave me a soft smile. “Humans have abbreviations for everything.”

“We have less time than you do.” I shrugged. “We need to make each second count.”

“Seren.” Keir frowned. “We talked about this. You'll live a fairy lifespan, remember?”

“Right.” I felt my face go slack. “I forgot for a second.”

“I guess you no longer have to use abbreviations,” he said gently.

“Among other things.” I gave a huffing laugh.

“Welcome to immortality,”—his starry eyes twinkled —“where we use long words in our long conversations; the longer the better.”

“Thanks,” I said and sighed.

“What is it?”

“Yet another thing to come between me and Dad.” I shook my head when I saw the expression again. “I know you're my father, and I'm even coming to think of you as my Dad, but I can't just let go of my entire life. Blood or not, Ewan will always be my

Dad."

"Yes, I know, Seren." Keir took a deep breath. "This was one of the sacrifices I chose to make when I gave you into his keeping. I understand, but please try to understand how much it hurts me to be reminded that the woman I loved lived with another man who had the joy of raising my daughter. Those are important years, as you well know, and I can never get them back. They will always belong to Ewan."

"Yes, but Ewan is mortal," I whispered. "He'll die in the blink of an eye for you, and then I will have only one father."

"I admit the thought has crossed my mind." Keir met my sad gaze with his serious one.

"And I admit that this new life scares me a little," I said. "I don't know if I can do this; bring peace to Fairy, much less between the realms."

"Seren, do you know what the motto of the Extinguishers means?"

"Yes, of course I do; *Never fear the darkness*," I answered immediately.

"But do you know what that *means*?" He asked again. "Many think it's a play on the name *Extinguisher*. That one who snuffs out a light, should not fear the dark which they create, but that's not it at all."

"What then?" I never thought to question his knowledge; he'd already proved how knowledgeable he was.

"It refers to the Courts," he said. "Saying that you have no fear of the Dark can also imply that you have never even considered being afraid of the Light. So, if, as a human, you can conquer your fear of both courts, then you should have no trouble with it as a fairy."

“Well, after seeing you burn Uisdean's blood tonight, I may have a little less fear.” I grinned.

“Attempting to kill you was bad enough, but then he made the mistake of breaking the law and sending the Sluagh after you.” Keir grinned back.

“You enjoyed kicking his butt,” I teased.

“Perhaps a little.” His face fell. “Fatherhood has filled my heart with love but it has also awakened the violence inside me.”

“I understand.” I nodded.

“I wanted to kill him, Seren,” he confessed. “My own brother. I wanted to watch him burn until he was only ash.”

“He's done some horrible things,” I noted.

“Yes.” Keir swallowed hard. “But I overlooked all of them until he did them to you. How could he betray me like that?” A tear escaped his eye and trickled down his cheek. “To kill Catriona was wicked but it wasn't an unexpected move from Uisdean. I always knew Cat was in danger. I'd just hoped she was strong enough to survive. You, on the other hand, are my only heir and as a childless king, Uisdean knows how important you are to both me and our kingdom. Attempting to murder you is an act so vile that I can't fathom it.”

“And that's why you're the Twilight King.” I smiled gently. “I thought I'd seen the worst that Fairy had to offer when I was in the Unseelie Court but when I was taken to the dungeons of the Seelie Court, I saw...”

“I keep telling you, Seren. Dark or Light”—Keir laid a hand on mine—“we are all Fey, just as all races of humans are simply human. It's the magic which makes us Light or Dark... or Twilight, just as race makes humans light or dark skinned. Both courts hold evil—horrible evil—but they also hold great good.

Honorable men and women like your Count Tiernan."

"*My* Count Tiernan," I whispered with a smile. "Yeah, he's all right."

"The Dark is led by a twisted heart at the moment," Keir continued, "and they must follow where their king leads. It does not mean that there is no good in the Unseelie. Do you understand yet?"

"Yes, I think I do." I blinked as a picture came to mind; of a bean-sidhe holding the hand of a little shellycoat. Compassion. Even in her hopelessness, she found the ability to be compassionate. Keir was right, I needed to look beyond the surface and see the true hearts of all the Fey. I set my gaze back on my father with a new determination. "If we want true peace between the kingdoms, we must either change Uisdean's heart or stop it from beating."

Chapter Forty-Nine

It turns out that changing or killing King Uisdean was not what Keir had in mind, but my surmisal had made him think. He wasn't ready to make any plans yet, but we had time, lots of it now that I was fey. We decided to let go of our issues with Uisdean for the moment and simply get to know each other as father and daughter.

We had a full day to spend together, including a night of camping in the forest; if you could call it camping when you slept in a pavilion big enough for ten. Keir showed me how to properly call the twilight creatures and how to talk to them. Tiernan's explanation, when he'd told me that fairies could speak to all animals, hadn't been specific enough. *We,* as in the Fey as a whole, could speak to all animals but not as individuals. Each court had their own set of animals whom only they could communicate with. The Seelie had the diurnal animals who were active during the day, the Unseelie had the nocturnal creatures who roamed at night, and the Twilight had the crepuscular ones who were active at dawn and dusk.

I had already glimpsed the way I could communicate with the fey animals, but I hadn't known that there were different ways of greeting each one and different mannerisms to use. Tursas (a type of fairy bear) for instance, preferred you to sit down in front of them; something I would never have thought to have done with a bear. But to them, it's a form of respect. It says; here I am, you have my attention, I want to speak with you, but I'm not looking for a fight.

Keir didn't have time in our short trip to go over all the intricacies of speaking with the animals but it was a good start, and

when I told him about the moths, he was so proud that I thought he was going to cry. He confirmed what Tiernan said; that the mending moths were fickle and rarely came when called, but he added that this wasn't their fault. It wasn't that they were malicious or ambivalent even, they simply didn't have as great a capacity for reasoning as say a tursa. It took a lot of magic to be able to connect with that erratic, insect mind and then even more to lure it into doing your bidding. Oh, and it had to be twilight magic of course, because moths are crepuscular.

My fairy father also pointed out that I'd done well by playing the statue for them with my outstretched arms. Moths like stillness, gentleness, as it was kind of necessary for their wellbeing. A soft voice was helpful too, as it was with most animals, but Keir taught me how to call them in my mind and connect with them on a more psychic level; making speech unnecessary. Having my Extinguisher background and my psychic abilities helped immensely, and I was able to pick up the technique fast. Plus, I'd already sensed the connection I had with the twilight animals the evening they crowned me.

Keir explained the “crowning” as well. It was the process of opening the mental paths between me and the animals. Once opened, the animals collectively placed a link in my mind so powerful that it could be seen in my aura. If they looked for it, fairies or clairvoyant humans could actually see a circular glow around my temples like a crown on my head. It was one of the highest honors Fairy could give a monarch and was what Keir had been referring to when he'd told Uisdean that I wore the crown. Once he looked past his prejudice, Uisdean had been able to see my crown-like aura. An aura that Uisdean did not possess, but one which I could clearly see upon my father's brow.

The day I spent with Keir showed me just how much I needed to learn about Fairy and how much he could teach me. I'd thought I was at least informed enough to handle myself in the Fairy Realm, but I'd been so wrong. The Human Council had been

right to be concerned over their lack of information. They knew even less than I'd thought.

Even with our massive libraries holding book after book of knowledge on fairies; how to interact with them, how to protect ourselves from their magic, and how to kill them, there was still so much we didn't know. A whole kingdom had been kept secret from us; a kingdom which was large enough to cover a third of the world. If I was to rule this kingdom, I needed to learn all of the things that had been held back from the humans. It was a good thing I was immortal now because one day in the forest with my father was not going to cut it.

When we arrived at Castle Twilight the next day, it was to find Tiernan waiting for us. He stood on the steps of the main keep; one hand on the hilt of his sword and the other on the top of Cat's head. Before the coach even stopped rolling, Cat was down the steps and barking at my door. I opened it as soon as we stopped, and she bounded in.

“Whoa!” I laughed and hugged her tightly. “I missed you too.”

“I'm glad you have her. It helps ease my mind when you're away from me.” Keir spared a moment to scratch Cat behind the ears before he climbed out of the carriage.

“I'm glad I have you too,” I whispered to the puka. “Were you good for Tiernan?”

“No, she's been a royal pain in the ass,” Tiernan said with a smirk as he leaned in the doorway. “Just like her mistress.”

“You!” I narrowed my eyes at him, and his face went slack in shock. “You have some nerve, buddy.” I pushed Cat out, effectively backing Tiernan up, and then climbed out to face him.

“What did I do?” He gaped at me.

“You tell me that you love me just as I leave Fairy?” I poked him in the chest. The large gathering of twilight fey around us went silent. “You're such a wuss. A lily-livered, fraidy-cat wuss.”

“I...” he stammered. “How was that being cowardly?”

“It gave me no chance to respond,” I huffed. “So, if I didn't return your feelings, I could just come back and pretend I didn't hear what you had said, and *you* could pretend you never said it. No risk.”

“Bad move, my friend,” Conri called out from the sidelines.

“There *was* risk,” Tiernan growled, ignoring Conri. “Simply loving you is risky.”

“Yeah?” I snapped. “Well loving *you* is no cake walk either, Legolas.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I'm not an...” he trailed off and blinked. “Did you just say that you love me?”

“Maybe.” I started to smile. “Irritating isn't it, when you're not given a normal declaration of love?”

“Well, you had better say it again.” Tiernan put his hands on his hips. “More clearly this time.”

“Humph,” I huffed and began to walk away.

“Seren,” I heard his aghast tone come from behind me. I could just imagine his arms dropping down in defeat.

“Oh, hey, Tiernan.” I looked back at him over my shoulder when I reached the castle stairs.

“What?” He snapped.

“I love you.” I gave him a sassy look and ran into the

castle; laughing delightedly as Cat ran beside me, barking in matching delight. Beneath the barking came the sound of heavy footsteps, and I glanced behind me to see Tiernan chasing after us.

"Children." I heard Keir sigh as I passed him.

Maybe I was acting more childish now that I was a fairy. Perhaps it was because compared to most of them, I *was* still a child. I had a lot to learn about my new life, my new magic, and my new people, but I was willing to put in the time. An extinguisher is never afraid of hard work... or the dark.

Epilogue

Things have been quiet in the Twilight Kingdom. No one has heard a peep from Uisdean or his Dark Court. Although, we now have allies in the Light. Nighean, Aodh, and their mother Neala went home to Seelie, but they've kept in touch with us and have begun to gather supporters for peace between the kingdoms. So far, it must be a secret recruitment since the hatred between the Dark and Light Courts still runs rampant, despite the return of the prisoners, but I have hopes that someday the secret will come out.

As far as my relationship with Keir goes, I now call him Dad more easily and try not to mention my other dad to him even though that relationship feels strained to the point where I despair that things will ever be right between Ewan and I. Cat remains a constant guardian and an occasional pain in the butt, especially when I'm trying to find some alone time with my other guardian. But Tiernan handles her antics as easily and as gracefully as he does mine.

Tiernan. I'd never thought to have a friendship with a fairy, much less call one my boyfriend, but there it is. He's my boyfriend, and I'm kinda head over heels in love with him. The best part is that he's just as in love with me, but when he talks about forever, I know he *really* means forever and it kind of makes me nervous. I don't know what's going to happen between us or who I'll become when I finally learn all about my own magic, but I'm enjoying what we have right now and who I am in this moment.

My name is Seren Sloane Bloodthorn. I'm an extinguisher, but I'm also the Twilight Princess and my work has just begun.

Keep reading for some sneak peeks into Amy's other series

and

the next book in the Twilight Court Series:

Pixie-Led

Pixie-led: The process of being led astray by pixies; bewildered.

Chapter One

Life as a fairy princess wasn't getting any easier. I'd thought that once I'd made the transition from Extinguisher Seren Sloane to Ambassador Seren Sloane Bloodthorn that things would start getting easier and more comfortable for me. As an Extinguisher, I was a psychically gifted soldier who kept watch over fairies in the Human Realm(and occasionally executed them). Now I'm a half-human fairy princess of the previously unknown Twilight Court, not only an ambassador between fairies and humans but also between the fighting courts of Fairy. I was getting used to the lavish living conditions and being surrounded by the strange blends of seelie and unseelie which were the twilight fairies. I was even comfortable with my new puka pet, Cat, who rarely let me have a moment alone. What wasn't getting easier was the constant revelations about the fey.

Every day I learned something new, which sounds wonderful. I think I even saw that embroidered on a pillow once... *learn something new every day*. Except I had thought I'd known all there was to know about the fey. Turns out, I literally hadn't known the half of it. The very court I was now princess of was unknown to me. It was unknown to *all* humans actually, because its king had wanted it that way. Bringing me to Fairy had meant outing his court to the Human Council and now not only I but all of the Council and the Extinguishers were reeling with the knowledge that there was an entire kingdom of Fairy we hadn't known about.

As the new half-human princess to the neutral court of Twilight, which lay between the warring courts of Light and Dark, I was in a unique position to expand my peacekeeper status into that of an ambassador. I was all for it but an ambassador needed to know the people she was working with and, as I mentioned before, I didn't know as much as I'd thought. There were all kinds of things that the Fairy Council hadn't seen fit to share with us humans. Not

that I blamed them, if the Human Council had known some of the things I was learning about, it might have caused a panic. It definitely would have threatened the truce between fairies and humans, and in the end, the knowledge wouldn't have helped them.

Then there was the magic I'd unlocked when I'd first stepped into Fairy and released the power of my fey blood. So far I knew of two different magics that I possessed. One was called star-crossing and I could use it to render both humans and fey fairy-struck, a condition which resulted in the victim becoming so passive, they wouldn't even eat without my commanding it. My other magic was dream-dusting. I could blow a sleep inducing dust from my fingertips. Both of them were pretty cool but the soldier in me longed for a more aggressive magic, something like my new fairy father, King Keir had. He could burn the blood within someone's body. Now that was cool... well hot. Whatever, you know what I mean.

As if all that wasn't hard enough, I also had to deal with a romantic entanglement. Okay, so that part wasn't so bad. Count Tiernan Shadowcall sounds like some stuffy royal fairy who spends his days strolling through extravagant gardens but actually he was kind of badass. A Lord of the Wild Hunt (which he loved reminding me of over and over... it's kinda a big deal), he was from a family of seelie sidhe who possessed the only strain of Light magic which could actually command the Dark. Well, not the Dark exactly, the shadows made by his light.

We'd met on my last Extinguisher mission, which ended up being a complete scam designed by King Keir to bring me home to Fairy. I'd been raised by a human named Ewan Sloane, a man whose wife, my mother, cheated on him with a fairy king and then had the nerve to pretend the child resulting from that union, namely me, was his. She had her reasons, mainly to protect me from all the nasty fairies who didn't want a half-human heir to the twilight throne. Still, my life had been a lie and she had paid for that lie with *her* life. Unfortunately I was paying for it too.

The man I'd known as my father for most of my life, Ewan Sloane, wouldn't speak to me anymore. He basically disavowed me as his daughter and told me to go to hell... or Fairy rather. It hurt. A lot. I don't know if it will ever stop hurting so I'm not going to stop trying to get through to him. I know my Dad, my *human* Dad, he's all bluster and gruff but there's a soft heart beneath it. My mom's betrayal had hurt him. He'd already been driven to the edge by her death and I knew he needed someone to blame, someone to hurt for this additional pain or he would truly go mad. I was a convenient candidate.

Still, I knew there would come a day when he'd wake up in his empty house and miss me. You can't erase twenty-six years of love overnight, not even with a heavy application of anger. Until then, he was moping on assignment in Hawaii, and I was hopping back and forth between the realms as I tried to make both councils happy.

The councils had been created after the last great war between the humans and the fey. They made the laws that kept our truce going and to enforce those laws, two military groups were created; the Wild Hunt, which was comprised of fairies and the Extinguishers which were humans.

Tiernan was on the job when we met and so was I. Technically the Hunt and the Extinguishers fight on the same side, that of peace, but in reality, we didn't work well together. They handled humans who broke our laws (knowingly or unknowingly) and we handled the fey. This made for tension between our groups. Tiernan and I were the exceptions, mainly because of this instant attraction we'd felt for each other. Originally, I had no intention of giving in to that attraction but Tiernan intended to change my mind... and Tiernan can be very convincing when he wants to be.

After I became the Twilight Princess (don't laugh) and then a fairy-human ambassador, the Fairy Council assigned Tiernan to partner with me. Which means he became my unofficial bodyguard and an official pain in my patootie. He made up for the patootie

pain by making other parts of my anatomy feel very nice though. I meant my heart, you perverts.

“Amazing. How does this just keep getting better?” I curled up into Tiernan's side after he rolled over. Okay so I wasn't just talking about my heart.

“I've had lots of time to develop my skills,” he grinned down at me, silver eyes shining bright in the shadows of my bed. The ring of black around his irises made them stand out even more but it was the silver scar running across his right cheek that truly brought out the beauty of his eyes.

“How much time exactly?” I asked casually as I traced the curving scar with my fingertip.

“I'm still not telling,” he smirked. “You can't trick me into it, Seren.”

“I *will* find out how old you are,” I narrowed my eyes on him.

“Not if I don't want you to,” he pushed back some hair from his face, fingers trailing first through the platinum color at his temples, then light gold, blonde, honey, chestnut, chocolate, and finally the jet black ends. No one could do ombré like the fey.

“If you cut your hair, would the tips start turning black?” I asked as I pulled the black ends of his hair forward.

“No,” he took my hand and kissed my fingers. “It's the length that changes the color. The longer it grows, the darker.”

“Interesting,” I mused but my train of thought was cut short by a pitiful howl. “All right, Cat!” I called and slid from the bed while Tiernan groaned. “I'm coming.”

“Can't you leave her in there a little while longer?” Tiernan whined.

“If I do, she's liable to break down the door,” I opened the door to my dressing room (too big to be called a closet) and Cat, my twilight puka who looked like a shaggy, gray dog the size of a pony, came barreling out.

She pushed me aside as she ran by me and jumped into the bed, making Tiernan groan again. I just laughed and climbed back under the covers as Cat did her usual three circles before settling down on the silk comforter. My bed was huge, we could have probably had two pukas and a cat-sidhe in it and still had room, but Tiernan liked to complain about Cat. I think it was a form of affection for him because he liked to complain about me too.

Just as I got myself settled, twilight arrived and with it came a rush of power zinging through my body. I'd learned to control the lavender colored sparkles that used to drift from my fingers at twilight (again, do *not* laugh) but it was hard to control the shivers I experienced with that burst of magic. Tiernan loved holding me at twilight, feeling my body tremble with power, so I wasn't surprised to find myself in his arms when I opened my eyes. What I was surprised by was the collection of moths hanging above me in the branches of night blooming jasmine which arched over my bed.

“What in the world?” I blinked up at the fluttering mass of bodies. “I didn't call the mending moths.”

“Those aren't mending moths,” Tiernan whispered with awe and I looked over to see both him and Cat staring up at the moths intently. Cat was completely quiet, an odd response for her.

“What are they then?” I swear, sometimes the fey drug things out to the point of being tiring. It's the whole immortality thing, they enjoy long conversations.

“They're mirror moths,” Tiernan lifted a hand to point at them and I followed it to see that the moths had positioned themselves so that they formed an oval, their wings going still as

the opalescence in their dust caught the light of my bedside lamps. They turned silver and for a brief moment, they reflected our amazed expressions.

Our faces blurred, replaced by a human male with light skin, blonde hair, and blue eyes. The perfect poster boy for the Aryan race. He was wearing a suit and smiling brightly as flashes went off around him, cameras I think. There was a blue curtain behind him with a symbol on it that I couldn't make out. Then the scene changed to one of war and then to just explosions. Buildings crumbled, bridges fell, and the White House burned. I inhaled sharply and Tiernan took my hand as the images faded into gray. Then, out of the mist, came a wooden staff. It just floated forward and hung suspended for us to see.

It was beautiful. The wood was a creamy white, polished to a soft sheen, and at the top of it was an intricate carving of a raven's head, stained black. It was so detailed, I could see each individual feather. The eyes seemed to focus on me and then the feathers ruffled and the beak opened on a loud caw. With the sound, the moths burst apart and then flew away together in swirling lines, heading out the open doors which led to my balcony.

“Ooooo-kaaaaayyyyy,” I turned amazed eyes to Tiernan. “Was that supposed to mean something?”

“I think it was a warning,” his face was even paler than normal, the silver of his scar standing out brightly. “The mirror moths show that which needs to be seen.”

“A warning of what? The end of the world?” I huffed. That which needs to be seen. I mean really, could it be more vague?

“Perhaps,” he said in a low voice and Cat whimpered.

“What?!” I gaped at him.

“That staff, did you recognize it?” He sat up and stared at

me intently.

“No but I'm assuming it's important,” I sat up too.

“It belongs to an unseelie hag, named Cailleach Bheur,” he angled his head down, staring at me like I might come up with the answer on my own.

“Cailleach?” I frowned and searched through my memory. “That isn't the staff that grants the power of enchantment to any who happen to find it unattended, is it?”

“That's my girl,” he grinned. “Yes, it is and it looks like a human has found it. Or is going to very soon.”

“And is about to use it to destroy the world,” I sighed. “I think I'd better get dressed.”

Saving the world is best done clothed.

Chapter Two

As soon as I'd notified my father about what we'd seen, Keir had raced to his bedroom with Tiernan and me hot on his heels. He'd gone through a door to the left of his bed, which opened into a large room reserved for kingdom business. Against the far wall in this room, loomed a large, ornately-carved pedestal. On the pedestal sat an orb of polished, perfectly clear crystal. Keir veered around the solid wood table and scurried up to the crystal ball.

“King Uisdean of the Unseelie!” Keir called out as he tapped the surface of the sphere.

The center of the orb filled with gray mist. The mist swirled, changing colors and then forming the colors into shapes. Those shapes stayed blurry for quite awhile, like looking through an unfocused camera lens, and then they cleared to reveal my Uncle Uisdean's uptight face.

“What is it?” Uisdean asked stiffly. There was an enormous bed behind him, draped in dark silk and pale women. Baobhan-sith to be exact, four of them. I was kind of impressed.

“The mirror moths have been here,” Keir said without preamble.

“And?” Uisdean's irritation dispersed immediately.

“Cailleach Bheur will lose her staff and a human will find it,” the stars in Keir's purple eyes were starting to shine, reflecting off the crystal.

“Is that all?” Uisdean huffed. “She's lost the damn thing before. Why does it suddenly concern you?”

“This time the human who finds it will bring about mass destruction,” Keir explained.

“Really?” Uisdean perked up. “For the humans?”

“Do you honestly think that kind of devastation won't spill over into Fairy?” Keir growled. “Not to mention the flora and fauna of the Human Realm. The beasts, trees, the plants, the oceans-”

“Yes, I understand your concern now,” Uisdean interrupted. “But what do you want of me?”

“Is Cailleach at court?” Keir asked, running a hand through his ombré purple hair in an obvious effort to regain some composure.

“I believe so,” Uisdean grimaced. “I don't make it a habit to keep track of the hags.”

“Well you'd better start,” I interrupted. “Because this hag is about to unleash hell on earth.”

“Hasn't humanity already done that?” Uisdean lifted a perfectly arched brow at me as his image began to blur.

The unfocused shapes dissolved into mist and then the mist vanished, leaving a clear crystal ball once more. Distorted reflections of our faces stretched over the polished surface.

“Well, you have to hand it to him,” I shot an amused look at my father. “Uisdean knows how to make an exit.”

“I fear that my brother will be of very little help in this matter,” Keir sighed. “We'd best handle this ourselves.”

“How are we going to do that?” I asked.

“We're going to see the Fairy Council,” Keir glanced at Tiernan and the two of them shared a look that made my stomach

clench.

Chapter Three

The Human Council only had houses in the Human Realm but the Fairy Council had houses in each kingdom of Fairy and a High Council House located both in Fairy and the HR (the Human Realm). The HR High Fairy Council House was located in Ireland, as the High Human Council House was, and had been established mainly to function as a location where business between the councils could be conducted. This was where the laws of the truce had originally been decided, where they were now amended if necessary, where any issue between the races of human and fey could be handled, and where the High Court (a mix of human and fairy high council members) convened for criminal trials.

A trial was a rare thing, normally the individual council houses handled any crime in their area, issuing execution warrants as they saw fit. But occasionally, there were matters too delicate or too heinous for the sub-houses to judge. Matters which required a verdict handed down by both fairies and humans together.

Due to its function as a court of law, the High Fairy Council House in HR was also a type of sanctuary. Not that you could hide from punishment there but rather, if you felt you were wrongly accused of a crime and were able to make it all the way there before either the Wild Hunt or the Extinguishers carried out your execution warrant, then you could demand a fair trial by the High Court. I guess they figured if you were bad ass enough to evade trained assassins, you deserved to be heard.

In Fairy, the second High Fairy Council House was connected to the one in Ireland by a rath, otherwise known as a fairy mound. This High Council House shared a small island with the Temple of Danu. There were several holy places where one could go to commune with the Goddess in Fairy but there was only one temple, one grand edifice where you could speak to Her and be

assured that your words would be heard. No one manned this temple. There were no priests or priestesses polishing the crystal columns or tending the flowers. The temple took care of itself and it was eternal. Nothing could touch it; no weapon, no magic, not even time itself.

The island was holy; sacrosanct. Located off the coast of the Seelie Kingdom, it was considered neutral territory. More neutral even than the Twilight Kingdom, as it owed allegiance to no court or race. This was where our Goddess and her brother had been born. Twins birthed by magic, they emerged as fully grown beings who were then separated; one to rule the Human Realm and one to rule Fairy.

The first fairy mound wasn't created by the fey, it was formed by Anu's passage into the Human Realm. Years later, the fey grew curious enough to explore the divine path. They discovered the Human Realm and they learned how to create more paths, more raths, all over Fairy. But this first rath was special and so it was guarded at both ends by the High Fairy Council. The Isle of Danu was the most sacred place in all of Fairy and as such, war or any type of violence was forbidden upon its soil. It was the only Fairy Council House where hunters weren't trained.

There were hunters stationed in the High Council House however, both in HR and Fairy. I was told that if the Council House were ever threatened, the hunters would destroy the rath, by any means necessary, even if it meant their own deaths, just to ensure that the Holy Isle remain unmolested.

When I'd first learned about the Fairy Realm, I'd been told that it was in an alternate dimension, connected to ours by pathways known as raths. We were aligned but separate. Then my father, King Keir, told me that Fairy was laid over the Human Realm like a veil over a bride's face. Our land masses were shaped differently but were you to chart the location of a fairy mound on Earth by latitude and longitude, the rath it connected to in Fairy would be at the same coordinates. I have since learned that both

descriptions are correct and yet both are misleading.

Fairy is in another location *and* it is laid directly over Earth. But it is not exactly an alternate dimension nor is it a part of Earth. It is its own planet. When you speak of the Fairy Realm, you are referring to the planet; Fairy. A planet twin to Earth, spinning in a twin universe, connected by magic in so many locations that the planets aligned.

The birth of the twins; Anu and Danu, released a tidal wave of magic. When Anu made his journey to Earth, it formed the first and strongest connection between the planets. Then Danu's children went on to forge even more bonds, linking the realms irreversibly. So every time someone travels through a rath, they are crossing through space to another universe. Like traveling through a worm hole. Mind-blowing, yes, but what really sent my eyes into spasms was the thought of the In-Between; the darkness within the raths. Is it space itself? A magical dark matter? Human scientists had no idea what dark matter was and yet it was what most of outer space was comprised of. Maybe they couldn't figure it out because it was magic. When I asked Keir what it was, he'd smiled and said simply, “It is the Between.”

So Fairy mounds were bridges crossing through the Between. There were raths which connected Fairy to the Human Realm and there were also fairy mounds which linked parts of Fairy to each other. We had used one such rath to reach the Twilight Fairy Council House. No, we hadn't gone to the High Council, though that had been discussed. In the end, Keir decided it would be best to start with our local house.

I'd been confused at first since the only raths I knew of in Fairy were the ones linking the kingdoms and those linking us to Earth. It was explained to me that the fairy council houses were also the headquarters for the Wild Hunt, just as the human council houses were home to the Extinguishers. Hunters were trained on site and the training was evidently top secret and quite dangerous. In short, they didn't want people sneaking up on them. So the only

way to reach the fairy council houses was through a fairy mound... and then only after requesting permission to approach.

Being royalty gave us a slight advantage and being an ambassador seemed to help even more. Then there was the fact that we'd be attended by a Lord of the Wild Hunt. Suffice it to say, our request to visit the Twilight Council House was met with immediate approval. Though council *house* may not be the correct word.

I gaped at the formidable fortress as our carriage approached through dense forest. Loosely medieval looking, as a lot of fey structures were, it wasn't what I'd call a castle. Its form seemed more to do with function than beauty, an odd thing for fey architecture. Not to say that it wasn't beautiful but beauty wasn't its priority. Like a lethal warrior, the Twilight Council House possessed an attractiveness that was unaware and even uncaring of itself. It kind of reminded me of Tiernan.

I glanced over at Tiernan, taking in his casual cotton pants and unadorned tunic, both in shades of sage. He had a soft wool cloak of deep cobalt over it all and matching boots that had seen better days. The most eye-catching element of his ensemble was his sword and yet even that was a simple design; a silver hilt inlaid with gold swirls. It was his working weapon, as opposed to the ornamental sword he wore to fairy functions.

This simple attire merely made Tiernan's beauty all the more evident. Like a sparkling jewel laid on dull, dark velvet, you were forced to stare at his magnificence. His gleaming hair was braided back, showcasing the clean lines of his face; the sharp cheekbones, the razor's edge of his jaw, and the long slope of his nose. His full lower lip seemed to pout in defiance of his masculine features, bringing just a hint of softness, but it was his startling silver eyes that always drew me. His eyes and that delicate scar beneath them.

I tore my own eyes away from his to look at the

comparable grace of the Twilight Council House. Smooth, gray stone walls soared up past the tree tops. There were no windows, no carvings or other embellishments. Just like Tiernan, the fortress wore only one lethal adornment; a line of downward pointing steel spikes halfway up the curtain wall. I assume they were meant to impede the progress of any intruder but honestly, who would try and invade the home of the Wild Hunt? That would be nearly as insane as attacking the Sluagh.

Our carriage and company of guards passed beneath a looming portcullis as shiny as the spikes along the walls. The width of the wall revealed itself as we clattered through a long passage, maybe twenty feet of arching stone, before we came out into a colossal courtyard. It was sectioned off into training zones, with all manner of contraptions set out for use. As I watched, an arrow went straight into the center of one of the odd gadgets and the rectangular device spun to present a new target to the archer.

Mingling among the training areas were squat, square buildings made of the same gray stone as the outer walls. They were so nondescript, they would have looked more at home in the Human Realm than Fairy. In fact, the striking fairies striding among them looked a bit out of place; like a soccer mom at a rave.

We followed a curving stone path through the plain structures and it brought us to a central building. This building was a little more ornate than the others, with a columned veranda stretching before its main entrance and a wide set of steps leading up to it. It was built of white stone, startling amongst all the gray, and it went up several floors. Each level boasted arched windows and the flat roof was enclosed by a crenelations like a castle wall. There was a winged fairy up there, leaning against one of the crenelations, watching our approach, but I lost sight of him when we pulled up to the main steps. A guard was standing at attention at the base of the stairs and he immediately came forward to open our carriage door and help me out.

Not so long ago, I probably would have balked at the

thought of a man helping me from any conveyance. But now I'm a fairy princess and fairy princesses didn't touch carriage doors. Gasp, perish the thought! Opening a door for myself in public would be a terrible breach of etiquette that would both humiliate my father and the luckless fairy whose job it would have been to open said door. Humiliating myself was one thing but doing so to my dad and some poor dude who was just trying to do his job, was not cool. So I went along with it and the long list of other idiocies that I had to put up with for fey society's sake.

"Welcome, Princess Seren," the door opener said formally. "King Keir," he nodded to my father. "Lord Tiernan," another nod. He gave a long blink when Cat jumped out but he didn't say anything, just preceded us up the steps so that he could open the door for us there... big surprise.

The guards that had accompanied us, a selection of fairies from both my personal guard and my father's, gathered their horses off to the side of our carriage and dismounted. There was a collection of water troughs before one of the barracks and this was where they led their horses to. I guess they didn't feel the need to accompany us into a council house. Or maybe they weren't welcome. Honestly, I had no idea and I made a mental note to ask Keir about it later.

"Thank you," I turned my attention back to the fairy who'd greeted us. He looked sweet actually, with pale yellow skin and bright green hair. His eyes were large and brown like a deer's.

"My pleasure, Your Highness," he closed the door behind us and began to lead the way down the hall. "The council awaits you in the reception hall."

"They have a reception hall?" I looked to Tiernan, who was walking on my left.

"It's like a throne room except they can't call it a throne room since none of them are royals," Tiernan smirked. "It's where

they conduct most of their business."

"Lord Tiernan," a sharp voice drew my head to the right, where a winged seelie sidhe was leaning against a wall.

Deep tan skin covered a lean body. His features were sharp and almost bird-like, matching the claws he had instead of hands. Feathered wings rustled in irritation behind him, their tawny feathers looking almost golden against the backdrop of white wall. I knew that winged warrior, and not just from the glance I'd had of him outside. We'd met at the same time I'd met Tiernan. And it hadn't been a pleasant introduction.

"Ryvel," Tiernan's voice was tight, tense.

"Well if it isn't Death-on-Silent-Wings Guy," I smirked. "You never did come back for our delicious meeting. Or is this it? Cause I'd still love to make your wings into a piece of wall art."

"Seren," Keir gaped at me.

"What? They're pretty wings, don't you think?" I blinked innocently. "He doesn't deserve them."

"If you didn't have a crown to hide behind, I'd challenge you, *Princess*," he snarled the last bit.

"You'd best back away and you best do it in haste, Ryvel," Tiernan stepped aggressively toward the bird-man.

"I'd heard you'd taken up with the half-breed but I didn't believe it until just now," Ryvel sneered at Tiernan. "Where's your pride? You're a Count of the Seelie!"

"And you'll be a dead man, if you insult my daughter one more time," Keir slid up beside Tiernan.

"Your Majesty," Ryvel gave a mocking bow and stomped away.

“Would one of you care to tell me what that was all about?” Keir looked from Tiernan to me.

“He was a member of my hunting squad,” Tiernan sighed.

“And we kind of rubbed each other the wrong way when we first met,” I shrugged. “He threatened to come back for me in the dead of night and bring *death on silent wings*,” I chuckled. “You gotta love fey eloquence.”

“Not that particular eloquence,” Tiernan was still staring in the direction Ryvel had left.

“You know, I've always wondered why it is that some sidhe have so many un-sidhe attributes.” I looked to Keir.

“The same way there are sidhe with Asian attributes,” Keir said in his poetic way.

“So they bred with non-sidhe,” I nodded and our escort choked and then tried to turn it into a cough. I ignored him. “Why aren't they considered half-breeds then?”

“The sidhe blood is deemed to be more dominant,” Tiernan took over. “If you have enough to pass for sidhe, then most will accept you as such.”

“So I should be accepted as a full sidhe,” I blinked in surprise.

“If it weren't that the other half of you was human,” Tiernan said gently, casting a glance at my father.

“So, Ryvel gets to call me a half-breed, even though he's technically one himself?” I huffed.

“He doesn't *get* to call you anything of the sort,” Keir said in a low, dangerous tone and then looked to our escort. “I want that fairy transferred to a different council house. It's for his own safety, I assure you.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the man bowed, his doe eyes growing larger. “I will make sure of it personally. We don't tolerate that kind of behavior in our hunters.”

“I'm glad to hear it,” Keir waved a hand. “Please proceed.”

“This way, Your Majesty,” the fairy hurried forward, leading us once more.

“Are you alright?” I whispered to Tiernan, who kept looking back over his shoulder.

“I don't like Ryvel being here,” Tiernan admitted. “He's a tenacious predator. Once he gets a target in sight, he doesn't stop hunting until it's dead.”

“Fantastic,” I rolled my eyes. “That's just what I needed, another villain for my story. We don't want the play to get boring.”

“I beg your pardon?” He finally focused on me.

“All the world's a stage?” I lifted eyebrows. “Shakespeare. Ever heard of him? He was kinda a big deal.”

“Yes, I know Shakespeare,” he rolled his eyes. “But if that were true, I wouldn't worry about Ryvel doing you harm,” Tiernan shared a look of commiseration with my father. “Unfortunately, this is all very real and Ryvel poses a threat which I refuse to underestimate.”

“I approve wholeheartedly,” Keir thumped Tiernan's back. “Kill him if he ever approaches Seren again.”

“Absolutely, Your Majesty,” Tiernan nodded.

“Oh please,” I grimaced as I looked over the chest-puffing males before me. “I can handle Mr. Silent Wings. Cat could handle him,” I gestured to the puka walking beside me and she gave a woof of agreement. “See?” I smiled at the men. “She may be more dog than cat but I think she'd like to chase that bird.”

“She may enjoy the chase but I'm not so sure that she'd catch him,” Tiernan set his mouth into a ominous line.

“Here we are,” our escort opened a set of double doors twice as tall as me, and ushered us through. As we passed him, he fell back and closed the doors behind us. I guess we were on our own.

I surveyed the large room as we crossed it. It was an open space of pale gray stone floors and pale filtered light. The light came in through crystal panels set into the ceiling and that seemed to be enough for the Fairy Council, there were no other lights to be found. Carved wood arches swept up the walls to support the high ceiling, coming to dramatic peaks at the center of the hall around those crystal panels. The walls were made of the same polished wood as the arches but they were adorned with tapestries instead of carvings or crystal. Within the intricately woven art, silver armored fairies surged across a backdrop of baby blue sky and vivid green fields. War horses pawed at the air while spears of wood and steel threatened an oncoming army. The tapestries were all of battle scenes, every last one of them.

Spaced at intervals in front of the walls, were suits of armor as well as weapon displays; shiny things with beautiful details of gold worked into the silver. It was if they'd been pulled right out of the tapestries behind them, leaving some poor fairy knight defenseless and naked. I searched the scenes for the naked guys but unfortunately didn't find them.

At the far end of the room was a slight platform, not really a dais, just a raised area that barely required a step up. On it stood a row of ornate chairs. I lifted my eyebrows at that. Tiernan had been right, this really was a throne room, they'd just done it more subtly than the actual throne rooms of the fairy courts. In front of the platform there was a long table and that was where the council waited for us I guess they didn't want to push their luck by receiving an actual king while they sat in their almost-thrones.

“Your Majesty,” a regal looking fairy stood, his long, straight, silky, celadon hair trailing almost to the floor. “And Your Highness, please join us,” he waved a hand to three open seats beside his own. “Lord Tiernan,” he nodded, “your presence is always welcome.”

“I wish I were here under happier circumstances,” Tiernan pulled a chair out for me and I gave him a nasty look. Chair-pulling was just as annoying as door-opening for me and he knew it. He didn't have the excuse of ignorance like the door-opener guy did.

“Thank you,” I mumbled as I sat.

“Princess Seren,” the green-haired councilman inclined his head to me. “It's a honor to meet you. I am Lord Catan, Head of the Twilight Council.”

“It's nice to meet you too,” I nodded back.

“King Keir,” Catan looked to my father, who'd taken the seat closest to Catan. “May we offer you refreshment? Wine or perhaps something to eat?”

“Wine would be appreciated,” Keir nodded, the lavender tips of his hair shifting forward as he sat.

The top section of his hair had been braided back elaborately, while the lower half had been left to hang free. It was almost a feminine style but there was something about fairy men, perhaps their aggressive masculinity or maybe it was simply their dangerous demeanor, which made it impossible to see them as effeminate. Even with his sparkling star crown set atop those purple braids, my father looked entirely masculine... and rather intimidating to tell you the truth

“Excellent,” Catan poured three glasses of fairy wine from the pitcher set before him. “Now that the niceties have been seen to, shall we discuss the reason for your visit?”

“The vision the mirror moths gave me,” I accepted a glass of wine, “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” a little smile played around Catan's lips.

I guess he wasn't used to being thanked by fairy royals but I just couldn't do that stupid head incline every time someone did something nice for me. It seemed ungrateful, or even worse; entitled.

“Your father informed me during our scry that you witnessed a cataclysmic event,” he continued.

“I saw the White House burning and a lot of explosions,” I frowned. “I saw a man's face and then a crow-headed staff. It came to life and cawed at me.”

Several sharp inhalations circled the table. Catan held up a calming hand and I noticed that the tips of his fingers were stark white. The rest of his skin was a normal buttery beige but the color lightened as it approached his hands until it became unseelie white; moonlight skin. I blinked and tried not to stare at his fingers as I processed it.

He must be a twilight fey. We were the only fairies who held both seelie and unseelie traits, being born of both lines. I peered down the table and saw that most of the fey present were twilight. There were just a few near the end who were either pure seelie or unseelie. And they were notably different in other ways as well.

It became immediately evident to me, through both the races and the different styles of clothing, that there were both councilpersons and hunters with us at the table. The council members were dressed more like my father and I; in flowing robes or gowns, and they were all twilight fey. The hunters were a mix of all kingdoms and were closer to Tiernan in both demeanor and dress; wearing shorter tunics belted with serviceable swords over worn leather pants. Their hair was tied back and their faces looked

incapable of artifice. These were warriors, not politicians, and personally, I would have felt more at home at their end of the table. The question was, what were they doing at the table in the first place?

Back in HR, council houses were headquarters for the Extinguishers but soldiers were rarely included in council meetings. Frankly, we Extinguishers preferred it that way. We didn't want to deal with the headache of fey-human politics. That's the whole point of having councils. They did their jobs and we did ours. Yet it looked like they did things a bit differently in Fairy. There wasn't a whole lot of them, just five hunters total, but they were obviously welcome in the discussion.

Which meant they had to be important. Probably Lords of the Wild Hunt, the same rank as Tiernan. At least as far as the Hunt was concerned. Tiernan also held the court title of Count, which made him a noble. In rank, that placed him about three levels beneath myself. Which is pretty damn high and pretty damn rare for a member of the Hunt. The nobility generally didn't join the Wild Hunt.

“Princess Seren's vision could be interpreted in many ways,” Catan continued. “Let's not leap illogically.”

“Jump to conclusions,” I whispered to Catan and Tiernan groaned as he shut his eyes in mortification.

“What was that, Princess?” Catan asked politely.

“Oh, I thought you might have been trying to use a human phrase to make me feel comfortable, as my father does sometimes. It's just that it's the wrong wording,” I explained.

“A human phrase?” Catan lifted a brow. “No, actually, I try not to use them but thank you for thinking so highly of me.”

“Highly?” I blinked.

“To assume that I was trying to put you at ease,” he smiled gently. “A gracious host would have done just that and I would have as well... had I known the ways of human speech more intimately.”

“Ah, well then,” I cleared my throat as Tiernan gave a low, relieved chuckle. “I apologize for the interruption.”

“Not at all,” Catan waved his hand magnanimously. “There is always time for pleasant conversation.”

“Lord Catan,” Tiernan began before I said something else inappropriate, like how I hated the way the fey thought there was always time for conversation. “I witnessed the vision with the Princess and I don't believe it can be interpreted in multiple ways. I think it's a very clear message of impending doom.”

“Oh my,” chuckled Catan. “*Impending doom*. That's rather dramatic, isn't it? Princess Seren stated that there were explosions and a white house on fire. I hardly see that as doom. Things explode all the time in the human world. They seem to like it that way.”

“Not just any white house,” Keir corrected before I could. “She saw *the* White House on fire, as in the American government's headquarters. The home of their president, their leader.”

“Oh, well that's a different situation then,” Catan began to frown.

“My Lord,” Tiernan interjected again. “These were no minor explosions, they were on the scale of an entire city being destroyed.”

“There were also images of war,” I added. “People dying in great numbers.”

“That's very upsetting,” Catan frowned deeper.

“I believe this requires some research, Lord Catan,” a hunter at the end of the table spoke up.

He was unseelie but I sensed no hostility from him. Usually, once a fairy entered the Wild Hunt, they sacrificed their kingdom loyalties to become loyal only to the Hunt and the Council. I'd run into a couple exceptions to that rule but I was hoping they were an anomaly. This man, with his midnight hair and moonlight skin, reminded me of my Uncle Uisdean (the jerk face) but his expression was open, intelligent, and concerned. I liked him immediately.

“What do you propose, Lord Eadan?” Catan asked him.

“I can take a patrol into Washington DC to search for the slachdan or any type of strange occurrence that may alert us to its use,” the unseelie hunter replied.

“The slachdan?” I leaned forward to ask him.

“That's the crow headed staff,” Eadan explained to me.

“Oh, wonderful. That would be very helpful,” I agreed.

“DC may not be the slachdan's current location,” Catan mused. “It may only be its destination. We should notify the hunters already on watch in the Human Realm and the other council houses.”

“Including the High Council?” A councilwoman asked.

“Especially the High Council,” Catan gave the woman a stern look.

“And the Human Council?” I asked.

“Not yet,” Catan held up a hand when I began to protest. “It's not the time for that, Princess. Grant me your trust in this please. I have a reason for my reluctance.” I gave him a grudging nod and then he looked to my father. “King Keir, have you

contacted King Uisdean about the Blue Hag's location?"

"Yes, my brother is looking into her whereabouts," Keir grimaced. "Though I can't speak to the sincerity of his actions."

"You think this may be his doing?" Catan lifted his brows.

"I hope not," Keir amended, "but I wouldn't put it past King Uisdean. His hatred for humanity runs deep."

"But something of this magnitude would have repercussions for the fey," Catan noted. "Our worlds are linked and chaos has a way of seeping through such connections."

"Yes, we pointed that out to him," I spoke up. "He said he'd look into finding her."

"That would be most helpful," Catan nodded. "Perhaps you should request a meeting with King Uisdean in person, Princess."

"What?" I gaped at the head councilman. "Why?"

"As an ambassador, you are allowed certain privileges that other royals are not," Catan smiled wickedly. "You may ask intimate questions, delve deeper into unseelie politics than even a councilperson may."

"You want me to interrogate the Unseelie King?" I asked with horror.

"If that's how you want to look at it," Catan shrugged. "Though I believe interrogate is a rather harsh word."

"I'd prefer not to," I admitted.

"What would you prefer for the Human Realm?" Catan asked, his eyes going sharp and shrewd. "Destruction or salvation?"

"You're a willy one," I gave him an impressed look.

“Of course, Princess,” Catan chuckled. “All council persons must be. We don't suffer fools here.”

“I thought you were unfamiliar with human sayings,” I lifted a brow.

“Oh, is that a *human* saying?” His bright brow lifted right back at mine. “I think you may be mistaken, Your Highness.”

Next sneak peek:

The first, Book 1 in the Godhunter Series:

Godhunter

(Kindle editions FREE on Amazon)

Chapter One

"There were of old certain men versed in sorcery, Thor, namely, and Odin, and many others, who were cunning in contriving marvelous sleights; and they, winning the minds of the simple, began to claim the rank of gods."

Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum,* 13th century

When someone asks if you're a god, you say yes!

Those were the words going through my mind the first time I met Thor. In my line of work they should have been words to live by… literally. At least they would have been had I remembered them in time. Unfortunately, Bill Murray's voice taunted me inside my head mere seconds too late. Thanks a lot, Bill.

My forgetfulness left me facing the distinct possibility of an early and creatively painful demise. If only I'd remembered the movie wisdom sooner. Yes, movie wisdom. Scoff all you want but it may surprise you how much useful information is hidden in movie dialog. At least that's what I tell myself so I can feel better about thinking in movie quotes half the time.

"So, Thor," I smirked up at the muscle-bound madman while he glowered down at me through a fall of his shimmering copper hair. "What's it gonna be? Hammer, lightning, fists of fury? Lightning might singe the rug a bit. Odin might not appreciate that, looks kinda old."

Maybe it wasn't a good idea to taunt a god but hey, what did I have to lose? He'd caught me red handed, bent over the new *Make War not Love* campaign plans I found in the Human

Relations room of Valhalla. I hadn't even heard the loud-mouthed God of Thunder coming in, if you can believe that. Loud-mouthed didn't automatically equate to loud-footed, evidently. Then to make matters worse, he asked me if I was a god. Like maybe I was a newbie or something, and what did I, the ever quick-witted one say? I said no. Could someone please tell me if they've seen an unclaimed brain lying about? I've no idea where I've left mine.

Then again, maybe I should cut myself some slack. It's a little shocking to be face to face, well face to chest, with what had to be close to seven feet of gorgeous, vibrant, leather-clad Viking godliness. Did I mention gorgeous? And the leather? I don't mean that yuppie silky lambskin either. I mean hard core, I'm gonna bust your ass if you look at me wrong, well worn but still strong enough to wipe the floor with your face, leather. Just seeing the way it teased me by gripping all that muscle, made me want to rip it to shreds just to teach it a lesson. Bad leather, Viking gods should be naked.

"You want to see my hammer?" Thor's eyes gleamed as he looked slowly up and down my body, which took longer than it should have for all five-foot-three… and a half… of me.

"Whoa there, Viking," I leaned back further on the table he'd previously planted me on. "Raping and pillaging days are in the past. You gotta catch up on the times." I snapped my fingers in his face. "Nowadays there are laws on the treatment of prisoners."

"Not for gods," his lips twitched just slightly but I caught the movement and I started to hope that I might actually make it out of this mess alive. Get 'em laughing, then run while they're distracted. It's not the best plan but it's worked for me before.

"Hey, like I always say, gods are people too," I smiled my best P.R. smile. Gods are great, they're not at all out to cause mayhem and suck power out of the human race, really, and I'm definitely not here to foil your evil plans. I smiled bigger.

“No we’re not,” the frown was back and he leaned a meaty fist on the table next to my hip for good measure. The leather around his forearm creaked at me gleefully.

Okay, that was more like it. I could handle a mad god better than a horny one. I congratulated myself on the sharpness of my tongue until I felt his thumb scrape lightly over my jeans. Damn. There was more creaky leather commentary as he leaned in closer and I found myself wondering how much strain the stuff could take. Maybe he’d bust his seams before he had a chance to bust my face. I can’t say the prospect didn’t have its own appeal even without saving me an ass whoppin'.

“Now, now,” I clucked my tongue at him, trying for my best schoolmarm imitation and hoping he didn’t have a thing for teachers. “You mustn’t forget your own history. Shall I refresh your memory?”

“Try me,” he made a sound halfway between a sniff and a snort, “let's hear what you think you know of gods.”

“Well for one thing,” I poked my finger into his massive chest, “I know you aren’t gods at all, so you can just stop with the holier than thou attitude, buster.”

A thick eyebrow arched up and Thor’s lips went into mini spasms.

“For another thing,” yes, I was still poking him, “I know where you’re from, Atlantean. I know your god abilities are nothing more than technological and magical advances your kind kept from humanity in an attempt to rule the world. Advances that ended up destroying Atlantis but still you all didn’t think that was any reason to stop practicing them.”

“Practice does make perfect,” his eyes started to spark with the very magic I’d referenced and I knew I had only one shot to get out alive and un-hammered as it were.

“I know something else too,” I whispered and cast my eyes side to side conspiratorially.

He couldn’t help it; his smile finally broke free before he leaned in closer, “What’s that?”

“I know if I do this,” I kicked my leg out as hard as I could and caught him where no man likes to be kicked, “god or not, you’re going down.”

I jumped off the table the minute Thor landed, groaning and cupping himself on the thick carpet. I ran through the door, already chanting the spell that would get me through the wards of Valhalla and out into the Aether. I felt the magic rush over me like a hot sentient wind as I ran down a long hallway to the tracing room. It sparked eagerly, urging me back to where I came from. Everything in its place and all that.

The tracing point sealed behind me with a low murmur of magic and a pressurized pop in my ears. Then the Aether pulled me in, my body becoming a mere memory with a tingling, freeing ecstasy. I flowed through streams of pure magic, my spell pushing me along to my destination so I didn't have to navigate the waters myself. With another pressure-pop that announced the return of my ears and a healthy jolt of gravity, I exited the Aether and felt my body reluctantly become physical again.

My momentum carried me into the opposite wall of the alley I'd arrived in and I automatically crouched into a fighting stance just in case Thor had managed to follow me through. Tracing was a rush, add the adrenaline of the chase to it and it left me panting for breath and shaking. My pulse beat heavily in my ears, the thudding drowning out the traffic I could see in my peripheral vision. I was holding my kodachi before me and I hadn’t even realized I’d drawn the Japanese shortsword. Remnants of magic sparked blue and drifted to the ground in a roughly circular outline but the wall before me remained the same, no ripples, no blurring, no sign of Thor at all. I stood slowly, leaned back, and

felt my heart rate start to decelerate as I slid the sword into its scabbard.

“God damn Buffy! Freakin’ vampire slayer gets all the props,” I muttered. “Vampires, hmph, please! Bunch of melodramatic pussies. And werewolves? I'd fight one of those puppies any day rather than a god. At least they can't pull magic out of their furry butts. Now fairies, I might not be thrilled to meet one of them in a dark alley… a dark alley kinda like this one.” I shoved myself quickly away from the wall and power-walked toward the street, still bitching about a fictional vampire hunter under my breath.

“Vampire Slayer,” I grumbled, “Try killing a god sometime and then get back to me. Blondie wouldn't last a day. She'd be whining to her mommy about the unfairness of it all within minutes. Oh, and falling for your prey... total amateur. You don't crap where you eat and you don't kill where you sleep. Or sleep with who you kill. No wait, that's necrophilia. Oh whatever, it's just dumb to let your prey seduce you.” I had a flash of Thor's striking face, blue eyes sparkling, and decided to just shut the hell up. That guy Spike was kind of sweet to Buffy, in a psycho kind of way. Ugh, I threw my hands up and shook my head.

You might be wondering how someone gets into the god hunting business and all I can tell you is: hell if I know. I pretty much stumbled face first into it. Like hitting a rock when you're riding a bike, I went flying and landed in a thorn bush. A burning one. A talking, burning one that proclaimed it was god in a booming voice.

I never really was the religious type. I'm more of a hands-on kinda girl. I’ve practiced witchcraft my entire life, which I kinda looked on as a religion of the self. I do mean witchcraft by the way, not Wicca. I know that's a religion but I don't practice it, I just do the spells. Wicca's a little too peaceful for me.

Well, maybe I haven't practiced witchcraft my entire life

but pretty damn close since Mom was teaching me spells in the cradle. Most babies got *The cow jumped over the moon*; I got sung to about drawing it down. Not that I'm complaining since it's really helping me out these days but I've just never seen the gods as a big part of my life.

Boy has that changed.

I walked out of the alley, into the bright Hawaiian sunshine, and held a hand up to shield my eyes. Well where did you expect the gods to live? Okay, so they don't all technically live in Hawaii. They have tracing points here but I've located some of their Hawaiian residences as well. The land is still filled with old magic, practically spilling with it since there isn't much land to begin with. So it's a convenient place to ferry in and out of god terrain. Whatever, it's my home and I have to say I'm getting a little tired of sharing it with them. They have their own realm to live in, they need to go there. Or they can go to Hell for all I care...which also happens to be in the God Realm. In fact, from what I understand, there's a few of them. They can take their pick.

About five years ago, I truly started developing a relationship with the gods and I'm not talking in the *Do you have a relationship with God?* Jimmy Swaggart sense. I'm talking about a deep understanding of how truly evil they are. Read your history books kiddies, most gods were revered mainly because they were so damn scary.

For me it all started with sex. At least it would have if my chosen partner for the evening hadn't been planning on killing me as a sacrifice to the Hawaiian God, Ku. You think you've got some bad date stories.

My young, Hawaiian escort for the evening was everything every female tourist (and some males too, I'm sure) fantasized about on the plane ride over. He was tall, dark, handsome, and built like a brick… well you get the picture. He also had green eyes, courtesy of some white ancestor who got lucky. Those eyes

were my downfall.

He took me out on a romantic date ending with us drinking an entire bottle of champagne at a Heiau, a Hawaiian temple. This particular Heiau was dedicated to... you guessed it, Ku. Now I know that doesn't sound too romantic but take into account that the Heiau was situated on a mountaintop overlooking Waimea Bay and the sun was setting. Orange sky drowning in a cerulean sea that crept into a verdant valley spotted with the flight of tropical birds. Can you see the sexy factor yet?

I may have been tipsy when we started. I'd just turned twenty-one so give me a break on the alcohol consumption, but when I looked up and saw a large local man watching us from the tree line, I sobered up quick. I shot him a nasty look but he was focused on my date so he didn't see it. Something in his gaze set off warning sirens (definitely sirens, not bells) and I turned back sharply to find a large Crocodile Dundee knife plunging toward me.

I had seconds to roll to the side before the blade ended up embedded in the ground, merely nicking my upper arm instead of going through my chest. I rolled back toward the knife, effectively removing it from my date's possession and my bleeding arm, as I kicked upwards. I don't know if I hit him *there* or not but he howled in serious pain.

"Ku," he managed to choke out, "Na waimaka o ka lani." He launched himself at me and in those few moments I saw more than you'd think was possible.

I saw the local voyeur come striding to us, hand extended, face rapturous. I saw my hand gripping the blade and turning it. I saw the look of shock on my date's face as the knife slipped into his neck. Internally I shouted "That's not a knife, *this* is a knife," Australian accent and all, and I almost started to giggle hysterically. It's amazing what the mind will do to protect itself and, like I warned you, I think in movie quotes a lot.

My mind had definitely needed some protection. I used to think those horror movies with blood spraying from neck wounds were ridiculous and inaccurate. I don't think that anymore. You hit a guy in the neck with a big blade and he bleeds. A lot. All over you if you just so happen to be beneath him at the time. It was extremely messy, to say the least.

I think the only reason I didn't start screaming was someone else beat me to it. The scream I heard was a terrifying mix of rage, frustration, and pain. It yanked my attention to the left, where I found the local man on his knees. He was right next to me. Way too close for my comfort. He reached for me and I didn't think. I just reacted. I didn't aim either. I just shot the knife out straight and followed through with my body. I was suddenly grateful for all the self-defense classes Mom had insisted I take. The biggest advantage training can give you is faster action… automatic reaction. Your body moves before your mind has a chance to process things and it saves you precious, life granting seconds.

The man was suddenly gasping beneath me, the blade buried in his chest. He started to murmur some words in a language unfamiliar to me. No, surprisingly it wasn't Hawaiian. I panicked and stabbed him again. I knew magic when I heard it and I also knew any magic he performed would not be beneficial to my health. He kept going and I kept stabbing, shutting my eyes to block out the carnage. I felt like I had a starring role in Psycho, the original not that stupid Vince Vaughn remake. All that was missing was the shower curtain and that ridiculously horrifying music. The sound he made was even more horrific though. I didn't open my eyes until he went silent.

The Heiau was gone, replaced by an elegant room in what must have been a multimillion dollar home. I realized he'd been chanting a spell to open a tracing point, a doorway to the Aether. The Aether, or the Astral as some call it, is a place of pure consciousness. It's also the link between our world and the realm

of the gods. Think of reality as a spiritual sandwich. The Aether would be all the tasty filling packed between the bread of our worlds. If you wanted to go from one slice to the other, you had to get through the tuna salad first. Okay, now I'm hungry.

The Aether is also where magic happens. As a witch, I use it for crafting spells. I can tap into it with my mind and create new realities there. Of course it's not as simple as it sounds. There's a lot of work and usually a few ingredients necessary for creation but once something is made in the Aether, it manifests on the physical plane.

When I was little, my mom told me stories of people who could travel the Aether, a practice called tracing, but the ability was lost to history. The spells had become scarce and unreliable, the destinations vague, the potential risks high. To take your physical body, make it pure consciousness, and send it shooting through the Aether to another location was a mind boggling concept to me. Yet there, beneath me, was proof it could be done. This man could trace, had in fact taken me along for the ride... and I just killed him. Great.

The man was a bloody mess. I'd nearly decapitated him in my blind attack. I didn't know it at the time but it's one of the few ways you can kill a god. Don't laugh, there are monsters out there who can put their head back on and keep going without missing a beat. Or just sprout two more. Can you say Hydra? Beheading doesn't always work. I repeat, *beheading doesn't always work*. Remember to take the heart too. Oh and burning is usually quite effective as well but with gods, the head is the most important part to take. I digress.

After I stopped screaming, (I was actually thankful I'd been able to delay the screaming portion of the evening for that long) I tried to wipe away the blood in a very Lady Macbeth fashion. Out damn spot, out. It was useless. I found the bathroom, not even caring that there could be someone else in the house, and went into the shower fully clothed. I can't even remember what the bathroom

looked like. All I recall is the way the water ran bright red and how I stared at it, mesmerized as it swirled down the drain. It was the first time I'd ever killed, as in anything. Well, except cockroaches but in Hawaii they don't count.

I stood under the spray and my body began to shake so I added more hot water. It never occurred to me to take my clothes off. I just sluiced the water off them when I was done and patted myself dry with towels. I remember leaving the towels on the floor like I was an obnoxious hotel guest. What did it matter? I think any attempt at manners had been lost when I'd left a corpse in the living room.

I came out of the bathroom to complete silence. I don't know what I was expecting. Shouting, screams, policemen waiting to gun me down. There was no one. I was totally alone… in the home of a god. It all sank in. The man praying to Ku. The Hawaiian in the trees. The Aetheric Plane. I had killed Ku. One of the main gods of the Hawaiian pantheon was lying on a white tile floor with his head barely attached because of me. What the hell kind of karma had I just racked up? Would it matter that it was clearly self defense? I decided it did. Then I decided to snoop around.

I mean I didn't even know where I was. Like I said, I knew about tracing but had been warned at a very early age to never attempt it. So I had no idea if I was still in Hawaii or even on the same plane of existence. I had just traced! I could've been anywhere. Tartarus, Niflheim, Minnesota. Oh please, don't let me be in Minnesota. Well, then again, there is that big mall there.

I crept through the god's house and hoped he was a bachelor. The last thing I needed was the Mrs. walking in. What's the proper thing to say in that position? "Hello Mrs. Ku, lovely home you have, sorry about the corpse of your husband. Oh and for making your husband into that corpse." That was one conversation I didn't want to have.

The place was deserted though. I walked past room after room filled only with modern Hawaiian furniture (go figure). The golden gleam of Koa wood merged with Hawaiian textiles everywhere. High ceilings were crossed with wood beams. Creamy white walls were a stark contrast to dark, hand carved tikis placed artfully. The Hawaiian statues looked like they were museum quality and they were all of the same god. Guess who… yep, him.

A set of sliding glass doors opened to a wide expanse of yard. That in itself screams money when you live in Hawaii, which I was relieved to find myself still inhabiting. Coconut trees crowded the edges of the well manicured lawn like gossiping socialites at a cocktail party, snubbing the shorter kukui nut trees around them. A retaining wall penned them all in, preventing any suicidal snubbed kukuis from leaping over the cliff beyond. The house overlooked Waimea valley. I couldn't see it but I knew the Heiau was below and to the right.

You'd think a god would have an ocean view.

Relieved that I wasn't stranded somewhere impossible to return from, I headed back inside. My brain had started to function again and it was reeling from the reality of my situation. I began to search in earnest, not with thoughts of thievery but simply out of plain curiosity. It wasn't long before I found the one room that seemed special. The big *KAPU* (Hawaiian for sacred – don't touch) written across the door might have given me a bit of a clue.

For lack of a better word, I'll call the room a study. It was full of books and gadgets I'd never seen before. There were weapons everywhere, not just hanging decoratively on the walls but scattered on the floor, as if they'd been tossed there after a long day at the office, if you catch my drift.

As if that wasn't disturbing enough, a wave of magic washed over me, prickling up my arms. When I turned in its direction, all I saw was a massive book. It sat enthroned on a lectern, watching me with the curiosity of a bored tyrant. Covered

in dark brown leather instead of luxurious silk, this book wasn't a bejeweled Emperor but a barbarian King. Completely unadorned by gilt or lettering, he needed no crown to proclaim his dominance. Power was decoration enough and this literary monarch wore it like a battle-honed sword, sheathed but still obviously dangerous. I approached it respectfully and it chose to be benevolent, granting me access to spells I never knew existed and information on a race of people who had come from Atlantis. No, not the resort, the actual lost continent.

With new knowledge came renewed fear. It would be wiser to appease my curiosity somewhere else. Somewhere safer than the home of a god I'd just decapitated. So I ran through the house, grabbing up a large bag (a piece of Ferragamo luggage to be exact, Ku had excellent taste) and hurried back to the study. The book went into the bag and then a couple of the more interesting gadgets on top. I told myself I was not a thief, I took them in the interest of knowledge and besides, Ku did try to kill me. To the winner go the spoils right?

By the front door I found a set of keys sitting in a koa bowl. I grabbed them up and continued my panicked flight right out the door, hoping the spoils included a getaway vehicle. I paused to get my bearings for a moment in a huge, circular, covered drive and located the garage set back to the left. A sleek, black Jaguar with an *Eddie Would Go* bumper sticker peered out at me indolently.

Eddie being Eddie Aikau, surfer and local hero who was last seen paddling away from the stranded Hokule'a canoe in an effort to fetch help. I shouldn’t have been surprised to see that little bit of homage to local culture but I was. I mean damn, I’d just found out gods were real; picturing them purchasing motivating bumper stickers was just a little too much for me. Then I noticed the vanity plate. *KuKuK'chu* stood out against the rainbow background of the Hawaii license plate. Hmph, Ku was a Beatles fan and, evidently, he was also the walrus.

I spared one second to giggle, nearly on the verge of

hysterics, and then jumped in behind the wheel. In no time, I was zipping down a private drive and breaking with a squeal when I came to an imposing iron gate. I looked around frantically and finally found the remote clipped to the passenger side visor. With shaking hands, I hit the button and hit the road.

I haven’t dated a local boy since.

Chapter Two

So that was how this whole thing began. That's how I scored this thankless fate that I can't even tell my best friends about for fear of them getting me committed. Or even worse, freaking them out so badly that they'd never be able to live a normal life. Kinda like me.

“I wouldn't wish that on anyone,” I sighed and trudged into the welcoming artificial cool of one of the millions, no make that billions, of ABC stores in Waikiki.

I grabbed myself a coke, thoughts still on the book I'd acquired that horrible day. Not only did I learn how to trace from the Good Book (hey, it’s done me a lot of good) but I also learned about the origins of the gods, the power gods got from sacrifices, and what constituted a sacrifice. It turned out that not only did they receive strength from direct offerings but also indirectly, from any death resulting from battles fought in the name of gods. Most wars have some kind of tie to the divine, even if it’s just plain rage (yes, there’s a god of rage). Also, any god in on the deal could share in the power surge.

So basically it paid off for deities to encourage their followers to fight instead of keeping them safe at home. Why settle for an occasional human sacrifice when you could get it on a mass scale constantly? Most of the gods didn't even have followers anymore, so this was their only energy source. With the downfall of the older religions, war became more necessary, and the gods had to come up with bigger and better plans to create bloodshed. The book didn’t tell me that part. The flier I found tucked into the book did:

We will survive!

Come learn how to create panic and discord among the humans!

April 20 at 8 pm, Valhalla

Special speakers: Odin and Huitzilopochtli

Potluck to follow. Gods whose names begin with:

A-G bring appetizers or salads

H-L bring main dishes

M-Q bring desserts

R-Z bring drinks

After I had stopped laughing hysterically, I decided to begin my career as a god-killer, or human liberator as I prefer to be called.

I paid the cashier for my drink and left the artificial air behind in exchange for the natural ocean breeze drifting sluggishly across Waikiki Beach. It wasn't a fair trade in my opinion, but the salt air did help clean out those old memories. I plopped down on an only slightly crumbling stone wall and stared out at the Pacific as it battered the golden sand under its frothy fists.

I hated the beach but breaking out of Valhalla can be exhausting and I needed a breather before I headed home over the Ko'olau mountains. The sound of the ocean can be comforting, and the waves are pretty to look at, even amusing when you catch a tourist trying to learn how to windsurf. However, at that moment all it did was remind me of how blue Thor's eyes were: deep

sapphire with a touch of green, like Caribbean quartz.

I loved light eyes. My own were dark brown and dull as far as I was concerned. They'd been green when I was born but had changed at nine months. My mom told me that she'd bet a friend they wouldn't change and she'd lost. Let that be a lesson to all of you ladies; don't tempt fate when it concerns your child. I shook my head and took another swig of coke. Must be the heat melting my brain. At least I wasn't bitching about Buffy anymore.

I rubbed at the ache in my neck as I pondered a new dilemma along with the old one of how to keep sand from getting all over me when I'm at the beach. Was it just me or had Thor let me go? I mean he didn't even try to chase me. Yes, I'd laid him low, but it shouldn't have taken him that long to recover. He was a big, strong, creaking-leather clad god. He should have been up almost instantly. I shook my head. Thinking about Thor was only making the ache in my neck intensify so I gave up and turned my full attention to the sand.

I hate sand. It's probably one of my biggest problems with beaches. Don't laugh; I'm also not overly fond of sun or surf either. Sand, sun, and surf, the SSS, it ranked right up there with the KKK for me as far as evil acronyms went. For those of you who have never seen a beach, much less a Hawaiian one, let me explain.

Sand sticks to you like an alien fungus that believes you're its only hope of survival. Wet or dry it will attach itself to any part of your anatomy it can reach and those cool ocean breezes everyone loves so much? They are in cahoots with the vicious, alien-fungus sand and will happily fling a fine mist of the powdery annoyance all over you while simultaneously lulling you to sleep with its salt-laced caresses. Result? You wake up hours later to find not only has your sunblock died defending you but you're now coated with a thin layer of sand, saltwater, and suntan lotion that has dried to a sticky crust. After you painfully scrape away the crust, you'll find the red glow of your newly crisped skin beneath.

The beach is evil, I tell you, evil.

So how could I love my home so much and not adore the pristine glory of the white sand beaches which make Hawaii such a tourist attraction? Well, first of all, I enjoy the beach just fine . . . through the window of an air-conditioned room with a Li Hing Mui Margarita in hand. Secondly, there is more to these islands than beaches. There's the incredible weather where even the rain is warm and I never have to worry about digging my car out of the snow. There's the rich melting pot of cultures, and of course, there's the food. Nothing compares to the flavors of Hawaii.

I was just about to get up and sample some of those flavors from a nearby Shave Ice truck when a dark shadow passed over me, sending a shiver down my spine. No, the shiver wasn't because of the sudden relief from the sun. It was magic, strong and confident magic, almost cocky. I knew that magic, had, in fact kicked it in its balls quite recently. I turned my head slowly, muttering a protection spell under my breath while reaching for my stash of powdered mullein.

"That's not necessary, witch," Thor's previously resonant voice was severely toned down for his foray among the humans.

"I'm nothing if not cautious," I smiled at Thor like he was an old friend as I jumped to my feet.

My legs itched to run, but it wouldn't do any good. The crowds around me were thick with vacationing families and honeymooners. If at all possible, I wouldn't involve innocent bystanders, and I was hoping he wouldn't either.

"I'm not here to harm you," he grimaced.

He'd taken the time to change his clothes before following me. Maybe he was afraid the leather lace-up pants of his previous ensemble would have made him stand out on a Hawaiian beach. Instead, he wore a pair of khaki pants and a tan silk Aloha shirt. He looked like a local businessman on his lunch break. A local

businessman with golden-red hair streaming past his shoulders, bone structure that would make a Roman statue weep, and a body that looked like it spent more time in a gym than a boardroom.

I kind of missed the leather.

"No, you're here to wow me with your literally classic good looks and your modern Hawaiian fashion sense," I looked him over pointedly, just to let him know that I found his outfit amusing. That's it. Really.

"Would you join me at the closest drinking establishment for a cocktail?" His lips didn't so much as twitch, even though his eyes sparkled a bit.

"I'm sorry, I think I have sand in my ears," I shook a finger vigorously in my left ear. I wouldn't have put it past the alien-fungus. "I thought for a second there that you asked if you could buy me a drink."

"I did," his smile spread over his face like a cat stretches in the sun; slowly and sensuously as if it had all the time in the world and was fully expecting a good scratch beneath the chin later.

I stood gaping for a moment before trying to recover. "Uh… why?" Yep, that's me, Lucy Loquacious.

I thought seriously about extending the knives from my gloves. The gloves I wore were part of the loot I'd made off with that day at Ku's. They had 3" long daggers resting inside them, flat against the backs of my hands until a sharp, downward movement would trigger their release. Then they extended over my fingers like lethal claws. I felt like Wolverine when I wore them but more importantly, they were deadly, turning every punch into a four-way stab.

They were also a little showy for Waikiki Beach.

So was my kodachi which, for the moment, was

camouflaged with a slight blurring of magic that made it blend into my leather pants. Maybe I could go for the dagger I kept down my top. The kodachi and dagger were just of human make, but I'd embedded them with magic for increased damage potential. The sword was perfect for taking a god's head. The curvature of the blade gave me the extra oomph I needed to make it a clean cut, but I wasn't about to behead Thor in the middle of Waikiki. The dagger would probably be the best choice for the situation. Maybe I could throw it at him and run away screaming.

"I'd like to talk to you," his eyes strayed to my cleavage, and I told myself it had nothing to do with the hidden knife and everything to do with my 36 double Ds. Call me vain, but I'd rather have him checking me out than knowing where my weapons were hidden. Mae West said it was better to be looked over than overlooked. Well, I needed him to do a little of both, look me over and overlook my knife. It was a survival issue and had nothing to do with him being hot.

I know, I sound full of it even to myself.

"Do I need to bow my head and clasp my hands first?" I backed up slightly and took a quick look around, trying to find a possible escape route.

He laughed, wild and vibrant, like drumbeats after midnight. It caused a visceral reaction in me, calling to something primitive in my blood and making me sway toward him. People stopped and turned to look at him. Hell, even I ceased scanning the area and just stared at him in shock. The tourists, however, looked at Thor eagerly, as if he were a celebrity they might recognize if they stared long enough. In a way, I guess he was.

"For you, I'll make an exception," he reached out, and I tried to back up, but the rock wall brought me up short. His hand dropped, but his smile stayed put, "Just one drink."

"Fine, follow me," I turned and walked down the sidewalk

casually, like it was just another beautiful day in paradise, and I wasn't still a little shaky from that sexy laugh. The sun was shining, children were splashing in the waves, and a Norse god was about to buy me a drink. Yep, everything normal here. I dropped my empty coke bottle into a trash can marked *Mahalo* (it means *thank you* not *trash*) and kept walking.

He didn't say a word while we walked, which would usually creep me out, but I was a little too busy freaking out about everything else for it to matter. Was I really going to do this? Sit down and have a drink with an Atlantean? This *so* wasn't part of my job description. What the hell was going on? I only interacted with gods at the end of a blade. Plus, in my experience guys didn't offer to buy you a drink after you kneed them in the groin. Maybe it was that whole divine forgiveness thing? I glanced back at Thor, and he grinned devilishly.

Nope, wrong god.

I led him up the shaded drive of the first building at the end of the beach. We headed up the wide white stone stairs and through an airy lobby to the bar of The Hau Tree Lanai. Very posh. I don't get a god offering to buy me a drink every day, might as well make it a good one.

I found a little table near the rear of the bar and sat down with my back against the wall so no other hot–er–*dangerous* gods could sneak up on me. Thor slid in across from me, almost entirely blocking the view. I peered around him for a second and then gave up. I figured I could make do with the scenery I was left with. Mainly him. Hey, I can be accommodating.

"Nice choice," he glanced over his shoulder at the open-air restaurant which ended abruptly in a short wall and then gleaming beach. It was too early for dinner, so the patio was empty, wrought iron dining sets waiting patiently for the night's excitements. A mynah bird cawed and took flight from the tree in their midst.

“Robert Louis Stevenson’s house was right there,” I pointed to the Hau tree, floor tiles imprisoning its small circle of earth. “There’s a picture of him lying beneath that tree.”

“Interesting. Do you come here often?”

“Really?” I shook my head and pushed a frizzy strand of hair behind my ear. Damn humidity. I had my waist-length dark hair in a tight bun at my nape. Usually, I wore it up when I went out hunting, but it was baby fine and was always trying to escape my evil clutches. “That's all you got? I expected better lines from you Thor, you being so… experienced and all.”

“Unbelievable,” he laughed again as he leaned back. “It's been a long time since I've met someone so entertaining when they're so scared, Ms… ?”

“Miss is fine,” I smiled again. I wasn’t about to repeat my stupidity so soon, “and I'm not scared.”

“Then you have the advantage of me, Miss,” his eyes gleamed as he leaned forward, completely disregarding my lie. “Concerning my name I mean.”

“I’ll take every advantage I can get,” I looked up at the sudden appearance of a waitress.

“What can I get for you two?” She stared only at Thor.

I couldn't blame her, though it made my lip curl in distaste. Guys as good looking as Thor always came with an attitude to match. Add to that, his “godhood” and you have a grade A, egotistical bastard. Give me a nice average human male over Mr. Gorgeous any day. The only problem was, Mr. Average wouldn't understand my hobby.

“I’ll let the lady order for us,” he smiled at her, nodded graciously, as if he were accepting his just due, and then looked at me expectantly. I shook my head, suspicions confirmed.

“A bottle of Patron Silver and two shot glasses please,” I smiled sweetly at the poor woman, who obviously hadn't learned to be wary of the hotties.

The waitress raised her eyebrows but just asked if we needed limes and salt along with. Very professional. Very used to rich alcoholics. After she had sauntered off, I looked back at the god incognito seated across from me.

“I thought you only wanted one drink,” he was smiling again. Did he never stop or was it just a clever way of lulling me into a false sense of security?

“I didn’t say one, you did,” I leaned back and crossed my legs, not to be ladylike but just to have an excuse to be a little further away from him. I had no idea what he was up to, and I wanted as much room as possible to reach my weapons if necessary.

“Alright,” he did that head incline thing royalty does but he did it better. “Good choice, I wouldn’t have pegged you for a tequila drinker, though.”

“You’ve known me all of thirty minutes,” I smirked, “part of which you spent on the floor groaning. You shouldn’t have pegged me for anything other than a woman to guard your goodies around.”

“I don’t know,” his eyes went suddenly still. “I think I could hazard a few guesses.”

Maybe it wasn’t wise to remind him of the specifics of our introduction, but hey, I just couldn’t help wanting to bring him down a notch. Cocky guys put my teeth on edge.

“Try me.” I narrowed my gaze on his twitching lips but then noticed how his eyes remained solemn.

“I’d say first of all that you’re some kind of an artist,” he

leaned in even closer as he spoke, “you paint, and your favorite subject is people.”

I went quiet and as still as his eyes were. The statement was accurate, too accurate. I started to wonder how much the gods knew about me until I noticed the spot of oil paint on my pinky. Phew, I smiled.

“Very observant,” I shook my traitorous finger at him.

“How would I know about your subject preference?” He smiled and leaned back for the waitress to deposit our order on the table between us. She poured us each a shot before leaving, and I was grateful for the Twix moment.

“Lucky guess,” I reached for my glass and eyed him suspiciously over the rim as I sipped. I only shoot tequila when I either; A. Want to get drunk, B. Want to act tough, C. Want to get someone else drunk, or D. Any combination of the above.

He shot his and poured another.

“Tell yourself whatever you want, Miss,” he saluted me with his glass and downed it.

Show off. I was *so* not going to rise to the challenge. He was a god. He could probably process alcohol in a heartbeat. Of course, I'm part Japanese and could do a fair amount of alcohol processing myself. I’m told it’s an allergic reaction a lot of Japanese have, but basically, it results in me being able to drink with the big boys but look as if I’m embarrassed the whole time (my face turns pink). I didn’t want to let him play on my insecurities, but then again, I’d been the one who ordered the damn bottle in the first place.

I threw back my shot and pushed it toward him. Oh well, I’m only human, put me down for B. Want to act tough.

“What do you want, Thor?” I pulled my glass closer after

he refilled it and lifted it to my lips.

"You," he smiled serenely.

I sputtered and almost wasted good tequila. I said *almost*.

"Excuse me?" My hand hovered mid-air, unsure whether to continue with the drinking program or just give up in favor of open-mouthed confusion.

"I think we're after the same things," he reached over and gently nudged my glass upwards. I drank the rest of the shot without thinking and without taking my eyes off him.

"I barely know you," I turned the glass over this time. "How could you possibly know what I'm after?"

"You were trying to steal the same information I was," he shot a quick glance around the bar.

"Trying?" Questions flew around my head like annoying gnats. Was he sent to get the plans back? Oh, did I mention I had the forbearance to grab said plans while I was kneeing him? Well, I did, and now the Norse God of Thunder sat across from me drinking tequila and talking about wanting me due to our similar goals. Why hadn't he just killed me and taken the plans if he wanted them? Why all the games? What the hell was going on?

"You *do* have them," he smiled like a cat that had just found a fallen bird-feeder… still full of birds.

"Why would *you* be trying to steal them?" I ignored how sexy his smile was. I am a professional after all.

"Not all gods are as horrible as you think," he downed another shot, his eyes narrowing briefly under his furrowed brow.

"Yeah, that's what the Christians keep telling me," I smirked. "Can't say for sure though, never met Jesus, just a few Mexicans with delusions of grandeur."

One perfectly formed eyebrow winged upward over the swirling blues and greens of his eyes. Was it the tequila affecting me or were the colors actually flowing together like mist? I pushed the shot glass away from me and sighed. It wouldn't do to get all sloppy drunk with a god. Who knows where I'd wake up, or *if* I'd wake up.

"Some of us don't agree with the majority," he pretended to misinterpret my signal to stop drinking and refilled my glass before placing it back in front of me. I stared hard at it for a second, so it knew who was boss, then picked it up and took a resigned sip.

"What do you mean you don't agree?" I looked around and faintly realized the sun was setting. Oh great, time for the rest of the monsters to come out and play.

"I don't think we need people to die for us to give us power," he frowned at my distraction, and I settled my attention back firmly onto what he was saying. "Most of us believe it's the only way to raise as much power as the freely given blood used to bring, but I don't agree."

"The blood?" I smirked at him and shook my head. "You mean sacrifice, specifically human, don't you?"

"I believe that's what I just said," he sighed. "There's no way around the fact that blood holds life and life is magic. When people sacrificed to us, we gained their magic, and there's nothing like it. The sacrifice of animals was good too but it was only due to the magic imbued into the blood by human intention, and it never came close to the power of a human life. It's that rush of magic that my fellow deities are striving for. They plot to bring war among your kind, so you'll kill each other in their name again, this time on a mass scale, and they will all share in the waves of energy it brings."

"Yes, yes," I waved a hand imperiously. "I know all that. What I don't know is why you, the God of Thunder, God of War,

God of the Vikings who were known for their viciousness, would suddenly grow a soft spot and decide you don't want us to fight anymore."

"Trust me, I have no soft spots," his lips twitched a little. "I just don't think mass destruction is a good idea. You've learned about us, you know we need followers to increase our strength. The more people remember us and respect us, the more we thrive. Some of us have grown immense in ability. What you might not know is that we don't need any more power to survive. Our talents are old, and our magic will sustain us until the earth crumbles away and is nothing but so much debris. Even then, we may still survive to find another suitable planet. And by the way, I'm not just a god of war; I also rule the sky, all storms, sea-journeys, and justice."

I could feel my eyes grow round at his candor. I had no idea they were strong enough to survive eternity without our sacrifice. I'd always assumed that without humanity the Atlanteans would have died out long ago. I knew their magic was great but I had no idea it was comic book, super villain great. My magic seemed a poor shadow of it, although Ku's book held enough of their spells to bring me a little closer to their level. Without that book, I'd already be dead.

"Impressive résumé," I found myself shooting tequila again. Damn it; I had to stop that. "It still doesn't explain why you'd choose to miss out on all the extra power."

"As I said, I don't think the current course of action is wise. The way things are heading, your kind could blow the whole world apart, and I like it here."

"Cause it's where you keep your stuff?" I smirked.

"Some of it," he smirked back.

"So what do you propose?" I could feel the stolen documents crinkling against my waist. The black silk of my top

was already limp from the heat, so it was a good guess he knew where said documents were. I reached to pull them out, but his hand flew across the table and grabbed mine.

"Not here," he caressed my hand along the line of the glove, where the leather was cut to leave my fingers bare. I assumed he was trying to make it appear, to anyone who might be watching, that affection had been his true intention. "You wisely chose a public place to speak with me, but if we go any further, we need privacy."

Privacy. Go any further. The words seemed to curl in my gut and try to snake their way lower. I wasn't sure I wanted to be alone with the Nordic giant. It had been awhile since I was alone with any man in a non-killing sense, and the last time hadn't turned out so well.

"What do you have in mind?" I slid my hand out from beneath his and he turned his head to the side, a little wrinkle appearing between his brows.

"I have a boat up at the Yacht Club," he pulled his hand back and used it to refill my glass. The wrinkle disappeared.

"Like I'm going to follow you onto your boat," I huffed.

"Do you have a problem with boats?" His eyes crinkled at the corners and just for a second, I wondered exactly how much he knew about me.

"You think you know me?" I narrowed my eyes at him and tried to look as fierce as possible, which is hard to do when you're built like I am. Oh, I worked out, but I wasn't what you'd call ripped. My love of food prevented that, and typically I preferred it that way. A woman should look like a woman. Unfortunately, my lack of height on top of my lack of prominent muscles didn't exactly make me Amazon warrior material. What it did do was make it hard for me to look terrifying. I was about as scary as an angry Poodle.

“I do know you, Vervain,” Thor smiled when my jaw dropped. “Did you think I wouldn’t know the Godhunter when I saw her?”

“Godhunter?” My whisper was almost a whimper.

“Were you unaware that you’d made a name for yourself?” His eyes showed a little surprise too. Well, yippee-kai-yay, I wasn’t the only one in shock.

“I didn’t realize I was known to the gods at all,” I had hoped my kills had gone unnoticed or at least unaccounted for by the rest of the gods.

“Oh, you’re known,” his smile returned. “Did you really think you could kill gods and no one would notice?”

“Well, it’s not like I left my business card.” Grisly scenes passed through my head. Images I tried hard not to dwell on and which I sometimes needed large amounts of alcohol to banish. I hunted gods; it wasn't like I was going to give them a fair fight if I could help it. Most of the time I felt like an assassin, sneaking up on my unsuspecting victims and leaving bloody crime scenes in my wake. I never worried about getting caught since most of their homes were in the God Realm. It's not like the police would be investigating. So I never thought to cover my tracks. Maybe next time I'd torch the place after I was done.

“A few of the gods you killed had surveillance systems,” he smiled as the blood drained from my face. Gods with security cameras. No, I hadn't counted on that. “You also left your scent everywhere. As soon as I smelled you, I knew who you were.”

“What, are you part Bloodhound or something?” I didn’t like being in the dark, but then I was still fairly new to this game. Maybe I should cut myself some slack just this once. I'd have to be way more careful in the future though. Fire, definitely fire. It would take care of any trace evidence I left behind and be a double guarantee on death. If only I could burn the memories as well.

“We have very acute senses,” he licked his full lips, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away. “Taste, hearing, touch, sight, and smell, they’re all heightened on us.”

“Well woopdee-diddley-doo,” I couldn’t help it, I was getting turned on, and I needed to cover it up with something. Sarcasm won out as usual.

Thor did that godly laughing thing again, which did nothing for my efforts to tamp down my libido. Maybe I needed to start dating. Going five years without getting some lovin’ was not good for god-resisting. I made a mental note to go out that weekend.

“I forget how amusing humans can be,” he was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes.

“Okay fine,” I sighed, “I’m funny, and I stink. No matter how much you flatter me, I’m still not getting on your damn boat.”

“I didn’t say you smell bad,” he was getting that confused look again, but at least the laughter had stopped. “Why don’t you accept compliments like a normal woman?”

“There is no normal here, *Thor*,” I said his name as if it explained it all. “Lots of interesting things going on but none of them are normal.”

“Point taken,” he licked his lips again, the bastard. “I’m intrigued.”

“No you’re not,” I put my pointer finger in his face, “you’re amused, remember? And the answer is still no.”

“I offer you my blood as safeguard,” he pulled a tiny blade from his pocket and cut his thumb with it. If the situation hadn’t been so dangerous, I would have laughed to have seen such a big man holding such a tiny knife. But then if you’re that big, you don’t need a large weapon, do you? He made Mr. Dundee seem like he was overcompensating.

I stared at the blood welling up on his thumb and didn't have a clue on how to proceed. I had the weirdest feeling he was offering me an extreme compliment, and I probably shouldn't insult him by refusing, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn’t remember coming across this in Ku’s book. Did he want me to cut my thumb and press it to his or what? Was I going to be blood brothers, er... blood siblings, with a god? The confusion must have shown on my face because he smiled and suddenly went all deity. He looked at me as if he was bestowing a blessing on me and I had to shake off the sudden urge to kneel.

“Will you accept my protection?” He lifted his hand, and his thumb hovered over my lips. The bead of blood seemed to shimmer as it welled up.

Oh damn. Was he going to put his blood on my mouth? Gross. I couldn’t even bring myself to say yes, I just nodded and he instantly lowered his bloody thumb. I blinked as the shock-waves coursed through me. Tingling, biting power ran inside me like needle-legged spiders as I felt his blood melt into my skin. I absorbed it and knew immediately that his offer of protection was eternal. I was under Thor's protection. A god was protecting the Godhunter. What irony.

“Why did you do that?” I rubbed at my lips and stared at the vanishing cut on his thumb, his body just kinda sucked the blood back in.

“We need you with us,” he slammed back another shot, and his hand shook for just a second as he put the glass down. “We can’t fight both you and them. Now, do you accompany me to my boat or not?”

Next, the first book in the Spellsinger Series

The Last Lullaby

Chapter One

I hunched my shoulders in an attempt to lift my coat collar a little higher around my ears. The weather in Seattle was dismal in December. Hell, in my opinion it was dismal during most times of the year. I longed for the kinder climate of my home, where even the rain was warm. But I couldn't go back to Hawaii yet, I still hadn't met with my client, and the payday for this job promised to be worth a little discomfort.

I finally made it to the top of the ridiculously long driveway, my eyes scanning the area surreptitiously behind the cashmere confines of my coat. I'd had the taxi drop me off a little ways down the street so I could do a bit of surveillance on my approach. Even in the gray, grim weather, there were at least eight guards spaced around the front of the house. One of them moved to intercept me, and I acted as if I hadn't seen him.

“Hold on, Miss. This is private property,” the overly muscled man in combat pants held a gloved palm out to me in the traditional “stop” gesture. I saw the gun on his hip, but he hadn't drawn it. That was mistake number one. I was in the driveway already, that made me a threat.

Bad guard, no biscuit.

“I'm expected,” I could have announced myself right then, but I wanted to test Adam MacLaine's security team.

That was my client, MacLaine, or he would be soon. If this guy was an accurate representation of MacLaine's security, it was a wonder the man wasn't dead already.

“Do we have a guest arriving today?” Mr. Combat Pants

asked a little microphone clipped to his shirt.

He had to open his leather jacket to access the mic, giving me a flash of the knife he had secured to an inner pocket. Damn this guy was dumb. He even turned away from me to talk into his comm. Like he couldn't conceive of a woman being a threat. I could have killed him three times already. I suppose I should have berated him for his bad habits, but I hated doing other people's jobs. And it was definitely someone else's job to whip this guy into shape. The mere thought exhausted me. I do not suffer fools.

“Name?”

“What?” I asked, completely distracted by his ineptitude.

And the spaghetti stain on his shirt. It was nearly invisible from a distance, but now that I was up close and personal, I could clearly see the crusty red mark on the black fabric. So, a fool and a slob. Definitely not the type of man I'd have chosen to protect me.

“What's your name, Miss?” the slob asked.

“Tanager,” I said, whispering to see if he would make the mistake of coming in closer to hear me.

“What was that?” he sure did. He leaned in close enough for me to stab him in the throat.

Of course I would never deign to dirty my hands in such a manner. My mother raised me better than that. I killed like a lady.

“The name is Tanager,” I said more clearly. “And I'm cold.”

Whoever was on the other side of the microphone heard me, and must have barked something into the muscle-head's ear. He flinched, then straightened.

“Sorry, Ms. Tanager,” he stammered and gestured to the looming house. “My team wasn't notified. Go on in. Someone will

meet you at the door."

"Thank you, Mr...?" I drew it out into a question.

"Ah, you can call me Jake, Ms. Tanager," he stammered.

"Thank you, Jake," I walked off, striding quickly to the beckoning warmth of the open front door.

A woman stood within the golden light of the doorway, her features as stern as her severe bun, and her eyes razor sharp. She nodded to me, and shut the door behind me after I entered.

"May I take your coat, Ms Tanager?"

"Yes, thank you," I slid out of it and sighed.

I had worn my usual getup to greet clients, pencil skirt and modest blouse. But instead of heels, I'd chosen knee-high boots. It was just too cold outside to go without something covering my calves. The woman looked over my prim outfit, and nodded in approval. With my long, dark curls pinned up, I looked very professional.

"I am Mrs. Chadwick," the woman introduced herself as she hung up my coat. "Mr. MacLaine is waiting for you in his office. I'll take you there now."

I followed Mrs. Chadwick down a corridor much too wide to be called a hallway. It was lined with expensive artwork, and the sounds of our footsteps were muffled by a silk carpet runner that looked as if it had taken years to weave. It was nice, but I'd seen all of this before. Done better, to tell the truth. My clients were the wealthiest people in the world. They had to be in order to afford me.

"Mr. MacLaine, she's here," Mrs. Chadwick said as she walked through an open door.

"Thank God," a man's voice groaned.

It was a pleasant voice, and it matched the office I entered. Not nearly as pretentious as the rest of the house, this room was more personal. It held framed family photos, an old chair that must have come from a time when MacLaine wasn't so wealthy, a wide desk made for function instead of form, and several sitting areas; one before the desk, one before a picture window to the right of the desk, and one in front of a modest fireplace. That's where MacLaine had been, at the fireplace enjoying its comfort instead of working at his desk. In the crowd I normally contracted with, that said a lot.

Adam MacLaine was around forty, with a trim build that suggested he didn't spend all of his time making money. His oak-brown hair was lightly sprinkled with white at the temples, and his skin had a healthy tan, but not the sunbed tan so prevalent in Seattle. His skin had seen real sun. Blue eyes crinkled as he smiled in relief, and came to meet me halfway across the room, hand extended.

“Thank you for coming, Ms Tanager,” he shook my hand firmly. “Could you close the door on your way out, Mrs. Chadwick?”

“Of course, Sir,” she smiled a little, showing a hint of affection for her employer. That said a lot too.

“Would you like something to drink?” MacLaine offered as his hand swept to a sideboard where several bottles waited. Not decanters, mind you, he had straight up liquor bottles out on display. The social elite would be shocked.

“No, thank you.”

“Alright then,” he looked unnerved by my refusal. “Would you care to have a seat?”

“Yes,” I slid into the chair across from his, and he relaxed a little, coming over to join me.

“I don't know how-” he started to stammer, and I held up a hand.

“Mr. MacLaine, who wants you dead?” I cut through the pussyfooting.

“I believe it's a man named Jonah Malone,” he sighed, and sank back into his chair. “His company was failing, and I bought it up at a... well, for a song, really.”

“Uh huh,” I chuckled at the song reference.

With the exception of his ironic wording, my client's stories were always so similar. Someone got the better end of a business deal. Or they were cheating on their spouse. Or cheating on their mistress. Or cheating on their taxes. No, that last one doesn't require my intervention. Not usually. But the issue was often about someone screwing someone else in some form or another.

“I assume you've compiled a dossier on him?”

“Oh, yes,” MacLaine fumbled with something on the floor beside him, and then handed me a manila folder.

“What exactly do you want me to do to Mr. Malone?” This was the line I asked all of my clients. I needed to be very clear with them. A lot of them assumed I was purely an assassin, but that wasn't the case. I thought of myself more as a fixer. I could kill when necessary, but that was the most extreme result I offered.

“I...” he gaped at me. “What are my options?”

Just as I'd thought. Cer hadn't told him. My old friend was having a laugh at my expense right about now. MacLaine had doubtless been referred to me by one of his friends, but he'd had to go through *my* friend, Cerberus Skylos, before he could arrange a meeting with me. Cerberus made sure the client was someone I'd want to work with before he passed on the info. And he usually did me the courtesy of explaining who I was, or at least, what I could

do, to my potential customers.

“Do you know what I am, Mr. MacLaine?” I asked gently.

“An assassin,” he whispered, as if he might be overheard.

“No,” I shook my head. “I have killed people, but that's not who I am. Or *what* I am.”

“Uh,” he started to look confused. “Are you a vampire?”

“Good guess,” I chuckled, “but no.”

The mere fact that I was sitting there, facing him, meant that Adam MacLaine knew about the supernatural world which existed in the shadows of the human one. “The Beneath”, or just plain “Beneath” is what we, the denizens of said community, called it. So, MacLaine knew of it, but it was very doubtful that he knew the scope of the situation. He hadn't even known the correct term for a vampire- blooder. The wrong titles would give away your ignorance in a heartbeat.

Humans who were aware of the Beneath usually knew about the forerunners of paranormal society, the obvious races; loups (don't call them werewolves, they hate that), other shapeshifters, and blooders. Sometimes they knew about fairies, but the Shining Ones were really good at covering their tracks, so that was rare. What was even more rare was when humans were acquainted with the other races; gods, witches, demons, dragons, angels, and so forth. Things that went bump in the night, and did a fair amount of rabble rousing during the day as well. We just knew how to hide our supernatural gifts better than the shifters and blooders.

“A friend of mine told me about you. He said you were the best. That you never failed,” MacLaine's face started to fall into the sharp lines that always preceded my revelation of the Beneath. It was like they could sense I was about to tell them something which would change their entire life. Or at least their ability to sleep

through the night.

“That's true,” I agreed. “So you know about vampires. What else do you know?”

“What else?” he scowled. “The shapeshifters, of course.”

“And that's it?”

“There's *more*?” MacLaine's eyes widened.

“Oh yes,” I smirked. “There's quite a bit more. But that's not for me to reveal. I only have the right to tell you about my own kind. Now, do you know what a siren is, Mr. MacLaine?”

“Like in the *Odyssey*?”

“Yes, exactly,” I smiled, relieved that I wouldn't have to explain everything. “My mother's people are considered to be a class of god. They were minor deities, more like an entourage to the more powerful gods, but still considered a divine race.”

“Are you seriously telling me you're descended from gods?” he started to stand.

I quickly sang the lyrics from Hollow Point Heroes' *Sit Down Shut Up*.

I had a whole arsenal of quick-draw lyrics just like this one, ready to be shot out like a bullet when necessary. I didn't even need the song to say exactly what I wanted to accomplish. All that I needed was one word to work with; sit, dance, die. You know, the usual. And then I could visualize, and direct the magic from there. This particular lyric just happened to work really well. And you'd be surprised how often I employed it.

MacLaine froze, his eyes going wide with horror as his body disobeyed him, and plopped back into the chair. He leaned forward onto his forearms, and regarded me intently. Giving me his full attention, just as I'd commanded.

“Good,” I pushed down the power that rose whenever I began to sing. “Now, don't look at me like that. You're perfectly safe. I simply needed to demonstrate what I could do before you wrote me off as insane. I put no permanence into the spell so the effects will wear off momentarily.”

“What did you just do to me?” Adam strained to push his words past the weakening magic.

“I'm getting to that,” I smiled. It wasn't often that I got a chance to talk about my heritage. “As I was saying, my ancestors were minor deities, companions of the Goddess, Persephone. You do know who Persephone is?”

“Yes,” he sighed deeply as the effects of my spell wore off. “I didn't think she was real, but yeah, I'm familiar with her myths.”

“Oh, she's very real,” I laughed to think of what Persephone's reaction to his disbelief would have been.

She just couldn't accept that people didn't believe in the gods anymore. I told her she was in denial, and she told me there were several rivers in the Underworld, but the Nile was not one of them. The Greek Goddess has a silly sense of humor.

“When Hades did his little abduction routine, Persephone's mother, Demeter, enlisted the aid of my family to find her daughter,” I said. “She gave them wings, and bid them to search the world for Persephone.”

“I've never heard that part of the story,” he was relaxing more and more now that it was apparent that I wasn't going to attack him. “They never found her, I imagine.”

“No, Persephone wasn't in the world. She was with Hades, in his domain. So my ancestors failed,” I confirmed, “and Demeter cursed them for it. They were turned into sirens. Women who sing eternally to their missing mistress, begging for her to return home.”

“I thought the sirens were mermaids who lured men to their deaths.”

“They're closer to birds than mermaids, but they do lure men to their deaths,” I said. “Their song is so beautiful, few can resist its pull, but it's also tragic. And tragedy can only create more tragedy.”

“Are you saying that you're a siren?” MacLaine cocked his head at me, fascinated, when really, he should have been afraid.

“No, only part,” I shook my head. “The other part of me is witch.”

“What? Like a Wiccan?”

I burst into laughter, and he scowled at me.

“No, Mr. MacLaine,” I got my humor under control. “Real witches are nothing like those tree-hugging, circle dancers. They're a separate race entirely, grisly and powerful. People you should hope to never encounter. My mother lured one of them to her, but he was strong enough to withstand the pull of death in her voice. In fact, he decided he quite liked her, and her music. He married her.”

“You're the child of a warlock and a siren?” MacLaine's voice rose in shock.

“The word 'warlock' means liar. Oathbreaker, from the Saxon waerloga. Male witches are still called witches.”

“Oh.”

“Yes.”

“So you're the daughter of a siren and a witch?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Um,” he chewed at his lower lip a bit. “What does

that mean exactly? What does that make you?"

"It's makes me rare, Mr. MacLaine," I smiled slowly. "Very rare."

"And you can sing people to death?"

"I can do much more than that," I decided to put him out of his misery. "My kind, though rare, have been born before. We are called spellsingers. We can transform songs into enchantment, bring lyrics to life."

"Like how you made me sit down," he whispered.

"And shut up, yes," I laughed. "There are a lot of races living among humans. Spellsingers are only one variety, though we are, admittedly, one of the most dangerous."

"Other races?" MacLaine looked as if he couldn't take much more, so I took pity on him once more.

"Don't worry about that right now," I waved a hand. "They aren't the ones who want you dead."

"Jonah," MacLaine growled. "I can't believe he's taken it this far."

"Mr. MacLaine," I said carefully, "my kind have toppled kingdoms, burned cities, changed the history of the world. I can do anything to Jonah Malone that you wish... for the right price."

"So, from conqueror to mercenary, eh?" MacLaine chuckled.

"I have no desire to destroy monarchies or watch Rome burn, that was my Grand Aunt Adelaide's thing," I rolled my eyes.

"Wait, the burning of Rome, where Nero supposedly fiddled..." he exhaled roughly. "A relative of yours did that?"

“Nero didn't own a fiddle,” I grimaced. “That instrument wasn't invented till much later. He played a cithara.”

“A what?”

“It looks kind of like a lute... never mind that,” I was terrible with tangents once I got talking. “Nero wasn't in Rome at the time of the burning. He hired Adelaide, just as you're hiring me. Someone else played music for her while she set Rome ablaze.”

“Someone else... you can start fires with your song?”

“I told you,” I huffed. “I can do anything the words permit me to do. If I sing about fire, stuff burns. If I sing about water, someone drowns. Sometimes, a whole continent,” I shook my head. I wouldn't tell him about Uncle Eilener and Atlantis. He still got flack over that fiasco.

“So what? You're- wait. Nero hired someone to burn Rome?”

“Sure,” I shrugged. “Everyone hated him. After Rome burned, Nero came in with food and supplies, opening his own gardens to house people. He polished up his image while secretly deciding on a spot to build his new golden palace. It was good PR, and smart property management.”

“What a bastard,” MacLaine winced.

“Yeah, Aunt Adelaide regretted working with Nero. That's why I'm a bit more choosy with my clients,” I smirked. “But what do *you* want, Mr. MacLaine? What result would you like, concerning Jonah Malone?”

“I'd like for him to just back off,” he huffed. “But I don't see how...” he trailed off as he saw me smiling. “You can do that? Just make him change his mind? Permanently?”

“Absolutely,” I inclined my head. “And it's even cheaper than killing him. Only two and a half million.”

“Two and a half *million*?” MacLaine huffed. “That's more than I paid for the company.”

“Your acquaintances did warn you about my price, correct?”

“Yes, but,” he frowned, “that's when my life was in danger.”

“Your life is *still* in danger,” I stood. “I haven't agreed to take your case yet.”

He gaped at me for two seconds before standing, and offering me his hand again. “Two point five million is just fine, Ms. Tanager.”

“Wonderful, then we have an agreement,” I shook his hand, then started heading for the door. “And just a suggestion,” I stopped, halfway there, and looked back at him, “fire your security team and get some professionals. Even without my magic, I could have killed them all within ten minutes. Especially the one called Jake.”

“You... what...” he blinked, and then recovered. “Alright, I'll do that today.”

“Smart man,” I smiled. Maybe he would live long enough to pay me. After all, he hadn't hired me to do his-

“How much for you to head my security?”

“No,” I shook my head. “I don't have time for that, and you don't have enough money to pay me.” His face fell. “However,” I pulled a card from the pocket of my skirt, and handed it to him. “This man will help you.”

“Cerberus Security,” MacLaine read, and then looked up at

me. “This is the guy I called to arrange our meeting.”

I nodded.

His eyes went wide, “Please tell me this isn't the same Cerberus who...”

“Guarded the Greek Underworld?” I laughed. “That was a giant dog, Mr. MacLaine. With three heads, I believe.”

“Oh,” he laughed, but it sounded strained. “Just a reference to the protection skills then?”

“Yes, exactly,” I smiled. Nope, I wouldn't tell him that he had guessed correctly.

Cerberus was actually a shapeshifting god with a fondness for practical jokes and dangerous women. I'm unsure which had cost him his job. I've known him for centuries, and he still hasn't told me. I know that Hades personally kicked his old, guard dog out of the Greek Underworld. Gave him the fiery boot. So now, Cerberus watched over humans. Humans who could pay him enough to soothe his wounded, puppy pride. Cer was damn good at what he did, but he was better at defense. He lacked the subtlety for a proper offense. If you told Cer to kill someone, he would probably just punch them in the face, really hard. I doubt he'd even stop to ask if the guy needed killing to begin with. So he kept to the security side of the business, and he called me for anything beyond that. Conversely, when my clients had a bunch of buffoons guarding them, I sent them to Cerberus.

“Ms. Tanager?” MacLaine stopped me again.

“Call me Elaria,” I smiled at him.

“That's lovely,” he grinned. “You must call me Adam then. I was just wondering... isn't tanager a type of bird?”

“Why, yes it is, Adam,” I was still smiling as I left. It was

always nice when someone appreciated the subtleties.

Chapter Two

Jonah Malone was a gangster. Or a mobster. Probably a whole lot of words that ended in “er”. He had clawed his way to the top, and then discovered that he didn't actually have a head for business. All of his enterprises were failing, not just the one MacLaine had purchased, and Jonah was reverting to his old thug ways to handle the frustration.

It had been a simple thing to schedule an appointment to see him. I simply sang to the receptionist over the phone, and she found a spot for me that very day. Then I walked into Jonah Malone's office, closed the door, and sang to him. In five minutes, he had completely forgotten why he wanted to kill MacLaine. He also decided to sell off his remaining businesses, and get out while he could. Perhaps meditate more. I figured why not help improve the guy while I'm messing with his head?

I walked out feeling relaxed, and satisfied with a job well done. I had video taped Jonah's “change of heart”, and sent it to Cer, who would pass it along to MacLaine as confirmation. Within ten minutes, MacLaine had transferred my payment into my account. I could finally go home. Maybe I'd have a Mai Tai on the plane as a special treat. Hell, maybe I'd have two.

I was on the way to the airport, when Cerberus called.

“Got another one for you, El,” Cerberus didn't bother with a greeting.

“I'm tired and cold, Cer,” I sighed. “Give it to someone else. I'm going home.”

“No one else can handle this. It's bad.”

“How bad?”

“Blooder army bad.”

“That's pretty fucking bad,” I made a face at the phone.

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes.”

“Whose army?” I asked.

“Some guy named Lincoln,” Cerberus' voice had a shrug in it.

“Like the president?”

“Yep,” he didn't offer anymore info.

“Where is this army going? What do they want? Who's the client?” I huffed. “You wanna give me anything without me pulling your fucking canines to get it?”

“Whoa, easy now,” Cer chuckled, “you're turning me on, Elaria, sweetheart. You wanna stop in Denver, and make good on some of your promises? We can fly to Kansas together after your failed attempts at pulling my pearly whites.”

“Kansas?!” I nearly screeched, causing my driver to look back at me in concern. “It's fine. I'm fine,” I told the driver. To Cer, I said, “I'm not going to Kansas. Who do you think I am? Dorothy?”

“You'd look cute in a little gingham dress,” he offered.

“The only way you'd get me in gingham is if you put on a collar and let me call you Toto,” I shot back.

“For you, baby? Anytime.”

“Great,” I rolled my eyes, “now we have our next couple's costume planned.”

“No, really,” I could hear Cerberus smirk. “I look good in a collar.”

Cerberus and I had been playing this mating game since we met, back when I was sixteen, and we'd never concluded it. Part of me wanted to see if he was as good as he implied, but the other part of me knew our friendship was worth too much to risk it. Plus, we did business together, and everyone knows that saying about mixing business with Percocet. Or something like that.

“Look,” Cerberus got serious. “The guy is an old friend of mine. He's a blooder, a gheara, but he keeps his people in line, and they don't cause any trouble. He's one of the good ones.”

“I don't know about a blooder being good, but I'll believe the bit about him keeping his people in line,” I chuckled. “It's not like you hear a lot of vampire stories originating in Kansas. I didn't even know that Kansas had a Beneath. I thought they'd all flown away to Oz.”

“Banning's a tough one. He fought his way out of Europe, and now the fuckers are coming for him,” Cerberus didn't even acknowledge my jokes on the Beneath, aka the paranormal community. Which he knew irritated me. I put effort into my comedy, the least he could do was acknowledge it.

“Lincoln doesn't sound European,” I noted dryly.

“He's not,” Cer finally laughed. “He's a local hire. Mercenary.”

“Ah,” now that I could relate to. “So the guy is just doing a job. I can't hold that against him.”

“Yeah, but he contracts with the Falca all the time. Those elitist bastards wouldn't even bother to come to America, and kill

Banning themselves," Cer huffed. "Lincoln, what kind of stupid merc name is that?"

"So what do you want me to do?" I rolled my eyes, something I did a lot when I talked to Cer. He had a thing about names, especially professional ones, and was always going on about them. And the fact that I didn't have one.

"Ma'am? We're here," the cabby called back to me.

"Hold on, Cer," I stuffed my phone into my purse, and pulled out some cash for the driver. I hurried out of the cab, and over to a semi-secluded bench, then pulled out the phone again. "You there?"

"Why do you always shove your phone in your purse when you put me on hold?" Cerberus grumbled. "Just press the fucking hold button. You think I like listening to all your lady loot knocking against the mic?"

"I'm going to hang up," I threatened.

"Fine," he growled. "I can get you ten million for the job."

I nearly dropped the phone. Ten million was twice my assassination fee. But then I thought about it. An assassination was one person, and Cerberus was asking me to kill... wait, how many blooders *was* he asking me to kill?

"How big is this army?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," he muttered.

"How big, Cer?"

"Big enough that a gheara blooder can't handle it with his entire gura backing him," Cerberus snapped.

Blooder, as I mentioned before, is the correct appellation for a vampire. Kind of obvious, I know, but that's how those names

usually came about. I mean look at my race, the spellsingers. Well duh. But the word gheara was a little more interesting. It was Romanian for “fang”, and it indicated that this particular blooder was a big deal, akin to a king, maybe even bigger than that. There were usually hundreds of blooders in a single gura; that's the group of vampires who kiss the gheara's pale patootie. In fact, most people call them a kiss, but the blooders don't like that. Probably because of the ass-kissing thing. The polite term is gura, which is yet another Romanian word, meaning “mouth”. Then there was the Falca, which were the elite blooders who controlled everything in the blooder world. Falca meant “jaw” in Romanian. Yeah, I guess all the names were obvious, they just sounded less so in another language.

Anyway, if this guy had an entire gura looking after him, and Cerberus still couldn't help him without me, then there must be a whole lot of mercenary blooders coming after Cer's friend. Crowds were tough, it was much easier to weave a spell around a single mind. To alter the free will of thousands of people at once was nearly impossible. So I would probably have to go another route. I could sing a spell to affect the environment, and attack them physically, leaving them their free wills. Or I could enchant a few of them at a time, and force those to attack the others. Possibly even a combination of both. It would be exhausting, and probably take me multiple songs to complete. I wasn't even sure I could do it.

“Ten million per song,” I said to Cerberus.

“What?!” Cer shouted into the phone.

“An assassination usually takes a few lines, half a song at most,” I explained my reasoning. I never arbitrarily picked a price. “And I charge five mil for a kill. So ten million for an entire song is a bargain, especially when you'll be wanting me to kill hundreds, possibly even thousands, of blooders. You know I'll need to sing more than one song to take out an army, so your friend can pay per song. If it gets too expensive, he can tell me to stop singing, and

handle the survivors with his gura."

"Gods damn you, Elaria," Cerberus snarled. "You have the mind of Archimedes and the cold calculation of Hades himself."

"Thank you," I said primly. "But you know as well as I that you were trying to dick me over on this one, Cerberus, and I'm not happy about that."

"He's a friend, El," he sighed.

"Yeah, that's why I'm letting you slide," I acknowledged.

You'd think immortals would end up having tons of friends, what with our extensive lifetimes. But it's actually the opposite. When you live as long as we do, you end up breaking most bonds. Family is usually the exception, but even they can drive you crazy enough to make you avoid them for a few decades. When you form a friendship that lasts, like mine and Cer's, it means something.

"So, are you meeting me in Kansas?" I finally asked him.

"You'll do it?" Cerberus asked with a measure of surprise.

"Of course I'll do it," I rolled my eyes. Again. "Any friend of yours, and all that heroine bullshit."

"Thanks, El," he said sincerely.

"Of course," I said just as sincerely. "Now, where in Kansas am I going?"

"Head to Lawrence," Cer said. "Check into the Springhill Suites, it's one of the nicer hotels there. A Marriott."

"Well as long as I can stay at a Marriott," I teased.

"I'll book a room for you," he promised. "Under your usual alias."

“Florence Nightingale,” I agreed. “Perfect.”

“And I'll come and get you after I arrive.”

“Alright,” I agreed. “See you in Kansas, Toto.”

“Bring your sexy red heels, Dorothy. I'll pack my collar,” Cer laughed as he hung up.

Chapter Three

Ah, Kansas. It was actually kind of pretty. Lawrence was a bustling town, but not quite as busy as Seattle, and not nearly as cold. It was November, so there was a nip in the air, but something about that breeze coming off the water in Seattle, made things so much colder there. Lawrence was more mellow with its chill, like Seattle's hippie sibling. Autumn had painted the city in its vibrant colors, and there was the smell of the season on the breeze; dry leaves and cooling earth. I breathed deeply of it as my cab drove me out to the Springhill Suites.

As promised, I found a room already booked, and paid for, under my alias. I showed the surprised clerk my Florence Nightingale ID, and he handed me the keys with a twitching smile. I gave him the standard line; my folks had thought it was a great joke to name me Florence, what with our last name being Nightingale and all. The clerk let his lip twitching take the shape of a proper smile.

I went up to my room, threw my bag on the bed, and started digging around for a change of clothes. I needed a hot shower, and something more comfortable than my secretary get up. I found a pair of jeans and a cotton blouse with bell sleeves. Perfect to relax in, and maybe go grab some dinner. Then I headed to the bathroom. When I came out, dressed but still rubbing at my damp hair, my phone was ringing. I snatched it up and answered.

“There's no time for me to meet you,” Cerberus said urgently. “Get over to the Crouching Lion Country Club now,” he rattled off an address.

“What?” I glanced out of my picture window at the night

sky. It was still early, the stars hadn't even brightened yet.

“Now, Elaria!” Cerberus roared. “They're here!”

“Fine,” I snapped and disconnected him, muttering to myself, “Crouching Lion. What is it, a kung fu country club?”

I grabbed the essentials and rushed out of the room. When I got to the street, I paused, not really knowing what I was going to do. I didn't have time to call a cab, and I couldn't exactly show up at a blooder battle with an innocent human in tow. So I needed to grab some wheels of my own. I scanned the road, where a steady stream of cars drove by. I was considering running out to flag one down, when a red sports car pulled away from the pack, and screeched up to the hotel. A smarmy guy got out of the car, and I smiled at him.

“Excuse me,” I ran over before the valet could reach him, and then leaned in close.

“Hello, pretty lady,” he leaned closer.

I began to sing and his face went blank.

“Here,” he handed me his keys, “I think you need to borrow my car. I'll be at the bar when you get back.” Then he walked past the stunned valet, and into the hotel.

“Some people are so nice,” I gave the valet a sweet smile before I climbed in the... what the hell was it? Oh damn! A Ferrari. Talk about luck.

I squealed away from the hotel, and hit the convenient GPS on the dash. Within minutes, I was pulling up the tree-lined, private road of the Crouching Lion Country Club. As I approached, the night brightened until finally, florescent flood lights illuminated the outskirts of a blooder horde. They considerately stayed off the road, too intent on crossing the massive golf course to bother getting in my way. It was the straightest path to their

goal.

A line of blooders stood before the main building of the country club. They posed in the aggressive manner employed by determined defenders throughout history. There were quite a lot of them, all armed despite the fact that they were blooders, and could have been considered weapons themselves. But I suppose when you faced an army of your own kind, your talents, no matter how impressive, negated themselves.

At the head of this fierce flock stood Cerberus, towering over Banning's gura. His massive muscles looked a little too He-Man next to the more mundane physiques of the previously-human blooders. Cer's long, dark hair was pulled back in a no-nonsense ponytail, and his even darker eyes were narrowed on the oncoming army. Until he saw me.

Cerberus smiled, an altogether chilling thing to see since it showcased a set of prominent canines that were a little thicker than your average blooder's. He let out a triumphant howl, and the line of mercenaries paused to look around at what had excited the shifter-god. When they saw only me, a woman in a sports car, they went back into attack mode. Obviously I wasn't a threat.

A guy at the center of the horde paused a little longer than the others, watching me carefully as I sped past him. I had my chosen playlist on pause, my iPod hooked up to the car's stereo, and I hit the button as I raced alongside the golf course. Music blared, Fall Out Boy's *My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark* going into its long intro. I shot up the drive before the club, and pulled the car to a screeching stop right in front of Cerberus.

The door slammed open with my violent shove, and I leapt out. Music blasted out of the vehicle as I jumped on the hood. I could feel the beat of it in my bones, vibrating through the metal beneath my feet. I glanced back at Cerberus and winked, my eyes briefly catching the shocked expression of the man beside him. He was blonde and a blooder. Had to be Cer's friend, Banning. Not

that it mattered. I turned back around just as the lyrics began pelting my ears.

I started singing absently as I thought out my battle strategy. I knew I'd have to rein in these mercenaries as fast as possible, so that they didn't make a run for it before I could get to them all. I couldn't leave any alive to make a second attempt. That's just sloppy work.

Fire would be perfect for forming a blooder-proof barrier. But I had to work up to it, wait for the words in the lyrics which would magnify my intent. So I started with the poor sods in front. My hand lifted to them as words shot from my mouth like bullets. Aggression blaring in my ears. Tension coiling in my thighs. The stuttering strength of the song cut through the cold air. Every blooder I pointed to exploded as if I'd blown their heads off with a missile launcher.

The crowd behind me started muttering as Cerberus chortled.

“Isn't she wonderful?” Cerberus sauntered up to lean over the top of the car and watch me work. “An artist. A true artist,” he laid his chin in his palm.

I continued to slam out the vicious verses, ignoring Cer. The song was filling me, becoming a part of my being, and the strength of the spell was rushing around me. A tornado of charged molecules clambering for motivation. Waiting for me to give them a direction. An objective. I felt glorious, powerful enough to make all those mercenaries mine. And I did, I snatched up their minds. Their will. Then I used the next line to vent the brewing musical malice. The blooders before me turned on their companions, and started tearing them to pieces.

“Holy fucking hellfire,” the blonde man moved up beside Cer.

I sensed him there, felt his intense stare on me, but didn't

have the time to look at him. Still, his face flashed in my mind; a picture of aloof male beauty. Strong jaw, regal nose, eyes glowing green in the shadows. Nice.

“I told you!” Cerberus laughed harder as I continued to pour my lyrical rage over the mercenaries. “She's worth every penny.”

The chorus came, giving me what I needed to manifest fire. I angled my hand flat, bringing it down like a blade with every sharp word. Each slice brought a line of flames surging up around the faltering army, causing many of them to shriek in terror and stumble back into their companions. The hand motions were more for me than the magic, like a conductor directing his symphony. But this symphony didn't need me to conduct it. All the magic required was for me to picture the result I desired, and sing. That was it. So I let my arms fall limply to my sides as I screamed the cataclysmic conclusion to the chorus, and my fiery prison penned the blooders in. The ring closed, and the magic surged through me, responding to the triumph I felt.

“Oh my god, I think I'm in love,” I heard one of the blooders behind me groan.

“Of course you are,” Cerberus called back to him. “For fuck's sake, I'm rock hard right now.”

The blooder who had watched my approach more carefully than the others, rushed forward. He snaked through the terrified mass, but he wasn't trying to calm them, he was simply trying to reach me. I was obviously his biggest threat, and he was obviously a take action sort of guy. It had to be Lincoln, coming to kill me before I could slaughter his entire army. It was a smart move, probably the best option available to him. Cut the head off and all that.

Too bad it was useless.

The song turned truly tragic, as if sensing my need. I

looked right at Lincoln, directing the destruction at him alone. The merc leader flared up like a torch, blooders pulling back from him in horror. But the bonfire didn't last long. It burned so hot, so intensely, that it turned Lincoln into cinders within seconds. He exploded into sooty snowflakes, swirling down over his army. Blooders cringed away from the remains, hardened soldiers turning into bawling babies.

The song surged on, and I spread my arms out in welcome to it. It was a confession now. A baring of what I had been born. A show of the hand which life had dealt me, and what I had done with it. What I had become. A creature of nightmares. A sorceress of songs. The villain no one could escape. The lyrics couldn't be more perfect for me. It was a declaration of pride in my own monstrosity, and a deep, secret fear of it. I let them see me.

And that's when the real screaming started.

It went on for another two songs, during which I killed every mercenary there in various lyrical ways. The blooders behind me were cheering, some of them singing along with me, and some even mimicked the motions I made. I had blooder backup dancers. Maybe we could take this act to Vegas. A song, a dance, and some magic. We were perfect for Sin City.

By the time I ended the third song, I was trembling, on the verge of passing out. But it was okay, the threat had been eliminated. My fire-oriented playlist had kept the heat up, ensuring that no one escaped, and those within the ring were dead or dying. I let the flames die down as well, until the only illumination originated from the building behind me and the scattered lampposts. The soft glow gently lit a field of corpses, slowly turning into the ash of the undead. One thing good about killing blooders; there was very little clean up involved.

The next song started to play. My shoulders fell in exhaustion. I turned to Cerberus, and held my arms out to him like a little girl. Even with me standing on the hood of the car, he was

still nearly as tall as I was, and he easily picked up my five-foot-four frame. Cer set me down on the road, but held onto me long enough to make sure I could stand on my own. He gave me a concerned look, blocking my shaking body from the cheering crowd. We never let others see our weaknesses. I nodded that I was alright.

Cerberus gave me a kiss on the cheek, and backed away, “Thanks for coming, El.”

“No problem, honey,” I smirked, then looked to the blonde.

“I'm Banning Dalca,” the blooder held his hand out to me.

“Nice to meet you,” I went to shake his hand, but he did that suave, old-school vamp thing, and kissed my hand in a way that was so much more sensual than a human could make it.

“Thank you for your assistance, Ms. Tanager,” Banning smiled slowly at me, his eyes lingering over my face.

“Just make sure my payment goes through by tonight,” I said abruptly as I pulled away.

Banning's eyes widened, and he looked as if he was going to say something more. But I was too tired to deal with him. I needed to get out of there before I passed out.

“I gotta run,” I looked back to Cerberus. “I'll wait for you at the place, babe.” I spoke vaguely on purpose. The last thing I needed was for an entire gura to know where I was crashing for the night.

“Of course,” Cer said with a smirk, as if we were an item.

I smiled back, it was our routine when some client flirted with me. Cer acted like I was his, and the guy usually backed off. This guy didn't buy it nor did he back off. As I slid into the front seat, and turned down the music, Banning Dalca followed me. He

leaned in, his eyes fading to mint under the car's interior light, and gave me a very unsettling look.

“Please don't leave, Ms. Tanager,” he whispered. “I'd dearly like to speak with you.”

This seemed way past some mere flirtation. It was weird, and it sent chills racing down my spine. The guy was hot, but I didn't sleep with clients, and I especially didn't sleep with blooders. Blooders were bad news.

“Maybe another time,” I tried to reach past him for the door handle, but he didn't budge.

“Please,” he said again.

“Get away from the car, Mr. Dalca,” I said in a dangerous tone.

“Ban,” Cerberus growled. “What the fuck, man?”

“Five minutes of your time,” Banning tried once more.

“No,” I snapped. “Now are you going to back away or do I have to make you?”

“Alright, Ms. Tanager,” he sighed, but produced a business card, and stuffed it into my hand. “Please call me after you've rested. I promise you, I have the most honorable of intentions.”

“Uh huh,” I slid the card into my bra. “Thanks, I got it.”

Banning sighed again, then eased away, shutting the door for me. I gunned the engine, and yanked the car about, but I couldn't help looking back at Banning as I drove off. He stared after me like I was breaking his little, undead heart. But the strangeness didn't stop there.

Just as I hit the border of golf course turning into forest, I saw a movement in the shadows. A flash of skin. I was instantly

alert, despite my exhaustion, and angled the car enough to shine the headlights into the area. There he was, a gods damned fairy. One of the fucking Shining Ones was standing in the trees of Lawrence, Kansas, watching me like some otherworldly peeping tom. Instead of hiding when I my lights hit him, he held up a hand in greeting.

I nearly drove off the road.

I didn't though. I veered back onto the asphalt and kept going. If a fairy waves at you from the forest, you don't stop for him. Heading over for a little chat is a great way to get yourself abducted. The Fey were generally considered to be the perverts of the paranormal world. They'd fuck anything, anywhere, anytime. A fairy's interest wasn't flattering, it simply meant you had a heartbeat and were within reach.

Okay, so maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration. The lesser fey; pixies, leprechauns, trolls, goblins, those sorts, would mount you in a heartbeat if you let them. Most would try even if you didn't let them. However, the elite sidhe, those who were known as the Shining Ones, were a bit more discriminating in their choices of bed partner. That didn't make them any less terrifying. In fact, the Shining Ones had all sorts of seductive spells on their side. They might not technically be rapists, but with that kind of magic, the technicalities blurred. And once they got you, they tended to keep you until you were completely used up. I've heard stories of all manner of debaucheries going on in Tír na nÓg. So it didn't really matter, lesser or greater, fairies were freaks.

It was that whole hedonism thing. No one did it better than the Shining Ones. They lived every moment of their immortality to the fullest, believing that you shouldn't do anything you didn't want to, and conversely, you should do everything, and every*one*, that you did want to do. They ate the best food, drank the finest wine, and wore the most luxurious clothes. They loved to mix it up too. They didn't care who created the item, if it was the best, they wanted it. Several of them lived this side of the Veil for that very

reason, the luxury.

The Veil is what we call the border between worlds. Planes of existence. Realms. Again, take your pick. These places were laid on top of each other, separated by an invisible sheet of magic. If you were sensitive enough, you could feel the magic, and in some places the Veil was thick enough that even people who weren't so sensitive could feel it. But to cross it, you had to either be magically powerful or know someone powerful enough to take you through. Which meant that the fairy dude standing in the forest, waving at me like it was just another casual night in Kansas, was powerful. And very pale.

I have good eyesight, okay? I caught a lot in that glimpse of flashing headlights. Though I didn't really need my advanced perception. The guy was really white. His hair was white. His skin was white. I couldn't see the color of his eyes, besides them being pale, so maybe they were white too. His delicate features nearly hid the fact that he was a guy, but that slim figure was definitely masculine.

Not that his looks mattered. What mattered was what he was doing in those woods. Had he been watching me? Listening to me sing? Or had he been there for Banning? Maybe he'd been the blooder's backup, something more subtle to go in afterward, on the off chance that the army of blooders didn't succeed. I almost turned around, but I knew I was too exhausted to be of any help. So I kept driving, and left the Shining One to Cerberus. If the dog-god couldn't handle one fairy, he might as well give up protecting people for good.

And finally, a peek into:

Wild Wonderland

one of the short stories from:

Happily Harem After

A collection of RH Fairy Tales

Chapter One

The house seemed hollow without Uncle Ted in it. I looked around the rambling Victorian mansion and wondered how he had made it feel so warm, so homey. Now, it felt like a mausoleum; a place haunted by the past.

I was entirely alone.

My parents had died when I was a child; some awful car accident that I don't remember. Uncle Ted was all the family I had–was the only company I had–period. He had looked after me, raised me, and saw to it that I had a good education. Most importantly, he had loved me.

Yeah, he was a little strange; a fact that I hadn't realized until I had begun to attend school. Then I discovered that not all little girls learned self-defense at age three, or swordplay at five, or jujitsu at seven. Well, maybe the last one, but I'm not certain of that. Most parents didn't have a laboratory in their basements either, nor did they warn their children about touching mirrors or the dangers of unknown holes in the ground.

My childhood may have been a bit lonely, but it had also been magical. Uncle Ted told me stories about imaginary worlds where men could turn into animals and where kingdoms were divided by the suits of playing cards. In Uncle Ted's world, caterpillars smoked hookahs, mice drank tea, and rabbits wore waistcoats (whatever that was).

Uncle Ted would have tea parties with me when I was a little girl, warning me that drinking too much would shrink me down to the size of a pea, but eating the cake would restore me. He admonished me to always tread lightly through flowerbeds,

because you never know when the flowers might be napping, and how would I like it if someone tromped through my bed and woke me up? He taught me the value of time, and instilled a deep respect for it in me. I knew to never waste it or take it for granted because that was very rude as well. Ted had been the best man I'd ever known, and now, he was dead.

I dropped to my knees and sobbed, covering my face with my hands. I'd never made any friends, mostly because Uncle Ted discouraged it. As much as he was a kind and generous man, he was also extremely paranoid. Ted didn't trust anyone and had hammered that same sense of distrust into me. I was angry at him for that because now that he was gone, I had no one. I had buried him without a service since there had been no one there to mourn him except for myself, and then I had come home to this empty house. We were wealthy people, which was probably why Uncle Ted was so paranoid, but money is nothing if you have no one to share it with.

“Well, it's about damn time!”

My head jerked up at the sound of the masculine voice. There, on the stairs before me, stood a man. He was about my age, with pure white hair and pale skin. He wore an old fashioned suit without a jacket, but with a lovely tapestry vest, from which he pulled a gold pocket watch. He peered at the watch, then at me.

“I was expecting you thirty-three minutes ago,” he chided me.

“Who are you?” I asked him as I stood. “And what are you doing in my house?”

“This isn't simply a house, my dear.” He grimaced. “It's a gateway.”

“A gateway to what?”

“To where,” he corrected me. “And I suppose that was

inaccurate as well. The gate lies *beneath* the house. The building itself is merely a disguise. Subterfuge for the subterranean entrance to Wonderland."

"I know jujitsu," I warned him.

"Yes," he drew out the word as he narrowed his eyes on me. "I assume that's some kind of warrior training that Theodore taught you."

"You knew my uncle?" I gaped at him.

"Alice, dear," he huffed. "I knew your whole family. I was present at your birth."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" I nearly shrieked.

"Didn't Theodore tell you?" The man scowled. "That was remiss of him. Perhaps he left you a letter somewhere?"

"A letter? Telling me that a man was going to meet me after his funeral?" I rolled my eyes. "Sure, it must be here somewhere."

"A letter telling you who you really are, Alice Wild," the man said sternly.

"Wild?" I asked. "My last name is Turner."

"By all that's bloody, it is not!" The man appeared deeply offended. "What an awful name. I suppose Theodore thought it was amusing–turning away from Wonderland or something silly like that. Turner is an action, not a name, and it is *not* yours. It belongs to an earther, one of *those* people." He waved his hand toward my front door. "You are a Wild, the last Wild in all existence, and heir to the throne of Wonderland."

"Oh, wow." I blinked at him. "You're bonkers, completely mad. There's a crazy person in my house."

“As if that has any bearing whatsoever,” he huffed. “Now, I assume that Theodore would have left something for you in his laboratory. Shall we?”

“How do you know about the laboratory?”

“Alice, do keep up,” he snapped. “I know you and your uncle. I've been here several times to check on you and receive progress reports for Their Majesties. The Card Kings of Wonderland are very concerned for your safety.”

“The Card Kings?” I asked as I followed him downstairs to the basement. “You just said that I was the heir. Maybe you should rethink your delusions.”

“Ugh.” He rolled his eyes. “I don't have the patience to explain all of this to you, just hurry up!”

“Where are we going?”

“To Wonderland!” He stopped and turned to stare at me in bafflement. “Are you a bit slow? Theodore never told me you were stupid.”

“I am not stupid!”

“All right then,” he growled, “let's go.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you! I don't even know your name.” I stopped midway down the stairs.

“I am Warren White.” He bowed. “At your service, Queen Alice.”

“Oh, now I'm a queen.” I chuckled. “I can't believe this day.”

“You must!” Warren declared. “If you do not believe, we are all lost, Your Majesty.”

“All right, easy now, Warren.” I held up my hands. “It was an exclamation. Although, I'm not too sure what you want me to believe in.”

“Why, in yourself, of course! And it would be foolish not to since so many others already believe in you. Truly; how much belief does one woman require?”

“Who believes in me?”

“Nearly all of Wonderland,” Warren growled. “Enough of this! Let's go, Alice! We're already late!”

“Okay, Warren.” I rolled my eyes and followed him down to the basement.

I know it sounds crazy, but I was just happy not to be alone. I didn't care if the man was a lunatic, at least I didn't have to think about Theodore lying dead in the ground while I laid in an empty house. Anything was better than that.

“Aha!” Warren was in my uncle's laboratory, at his desk, and had found an envelope in the drawer. “Here it is. I knew he'd leave word for you.”

Warren handed me the envelope, and I saw that it had my name scrawled across the front of it in my uncle's handwriting. I scowled at it a moment before I tore open the sealed envelope and read it aloud.

“Alice, my sweet girl, there is so much that I haven't told you, but I'm sure that Warren will explain; either him or Nicholas. You can trust them completely, as well as the Card Kings. They all have your best interests at heart because your best interests are also theirs. Things are about to get topsy-turvy for you, Alice. I wish that I could be there to help you, but if you're reading this, it means that time has come to an end for me. It runs here, not like over there, and I have lost track of it, it seems. But your time is now, Alice. I have done the best I could for you. I have given you the

tools you'll need in the days to come. Fight, my sweet girl; fight for Wonderland and her people because both belong to you. You are the last of the Wilds, and Wonderland needs you. Remember what I've taught you; all the stories are true. Keep your heart and mind open, love is not always what we expect it to be. All my love, Uncle Ted. PS Follow the white rabbit."

"Okay, are you ready now?" Warren asked impatiently.

"No, I'm not ready now," I huffed. "What does this mean? Wonderland needs me? I'm the last of the Wilds? Follow a damn rabbit?"

"That last bit would be me," Warren said. "But first, we need to make you small enough to follow me."

"Will this start making sense soon?"

"Absolutely not," he declared primly. "Sense is for earthers; wonderlanders know that the best sense is non. Ah, yes, here it is!" He took a crystal bottle down from a bookshelf and handed it to me. "Just one sip. Too much and you'll be the size of–"

"A pea," I finished as I took the bottle.

"He did tell you! Excellent. Drink up."

"This is absurd," I said as I took the bottle. Then I noticed the label tied to it. Again, my uncle's handwriting. I read, "Drink me, Alice." I grimaced at the bottle. "Well, that's to the point. Oh, why not?"

I uncorked the bottle and took a sip.

"Hurry; hand it over before you drop it," Warren said as he snatched the bottle away from me and tucked it into his vest.

His voice seemed to echo around me as my world grew. or I shrunk, rather. I jolted in shock as I stared up at Warren's massive

body. His legs were like redwoods.

“All right, in you go.” He waved his hand behind the same bookshelf that he had taken the bottle from. “Don't worry; I have the cake.” He patted his vest pocket.

I went to the edge of the bookshelf and peered around it. It was pulled out just enough for a small animal to crawl behind it, or a very small Alice. And there was a hole in the stone wall.

“Come on, Alice. I don't have all day,” Warren huffed.

Then Warren's body shimmered and shrank. I leapt back as he became a fluffy, white rabbit. All of his clothing disappeared except for his tapestry vest, which shrank along with him. Warren the White Rabbit hopped past me and into the hole.

“Follow the white rabbit,” I whispered to myself. “What the fuck is happening to me?”

“Hurry up, Alice!” The White Rabbit called.

So, I followed him into his hole. At the point, I really had no choice.

Chapter Two

A few feet into the hole, the ground dropped out from under me, and I started to fall. I screamed for awhile, and then I realized that I was floating more than I was falling. I opened my eyes warily and saw the root-veined earth slowly shift into raw stone, and then into polished marble. I ran my hand along the side of the tube I fell through, and found myself slowly approaching it as my point of gravity altered. Everything turned around on me and the walls of the tube became the bottom of a shaft, until I was sliding down the slick stone and out into a circular room. My butt skidded across the marble floor, losing momentum, and then I came to a squeaking stop.

Warren was still in his rabbit form, waiting for me near a curved wall, tapping his foot impatiently.

“Hurry up, Alice!” He hopped over to one of five doors that were spaced around the room, and kicked it open.

The door Warren chose was the only rabbit-sized door in the place. The other doors were of a size more appropriate for the average human. Since I was still a miniature version of myself, I didn't concern myself with the other doors, but I did note that they each bore a symbol from a deck of playing cards; the heart and diamond were both red, and the spade and club were black. I hadn't caught the symbol on the back of the tiny door, or if there had been one at all, and I didn't think about looking for it until after I was through.

Then I had other things to concern myself with.

At first, I thought we were in a forest; then I realized that the monstrous trunks, slick and green, were actually flower stalks.

I had stopped to stare up through the cover of their enormous leaves, at the vibrant petals above me, and Warren hadn't noticed. He just kept hopping ahead, all Little Bunny Foo Foo–until the flowers attacked me.

With a trumpeting sound, a daffodil knocked me off my feet. Then a tiger lily growled and undulated its stalk down to . . . well, stalk me. I shrieked and rolled into a fighting stance, ready to punch out some petunias, when Warren doubled back and placed himself before me protectively.

“This is the Wild Heir, you foolish flowers!” Warren shouted as he thumped his back leg. “Do you not know your queen?”

The flowers froze, then lowered their heads to brush me with inquisitive petals. I straightened out of my crouch, looking at the monstrous blooms warily. By the time they were done inspecting me, I was covered in pollen, but they seemed satisfied. The blossoms bent double as if they were bowing.

“Now, if you don't mind,” Warren said primly, “we're expected at tea. I swear, the hurrier I go, the behinder I get!”

The flowers eased back, properly chastised, and Warren and I continued up the path.

“Do not tarry, Your Majesty,” Warren snapped. “Tulgey Wood is full of many dangers, and we've only just entered it. We still need to pass by the Bandersnatch burrow before we reach our rendezvous point.”

“Who are we meeting?” I asked.

“The others,” he said. “You'll know them when you meet them.”

“Obviously,” I huffed and trudged after him. “Can't we get big now? Then we wouldn't have to worry about joining the War

of the Roses. Also, I can't believe I just said that."

"What have I said about belief, Alice?"

"To have some?" I was totally baffled.

"Absolutely," he said approvingly. "We cannot grow right now. It's easier to get by the bandersnatch when you're small."

"What's a bandersnatch?"

"A frumious creature with a long neck and snapping jaws," Warren said gravely.

"What the hell does frumious mean?" I gave him my bewildered face.

"It is the concise word for the bandersnatch's fuming and furious character," Warren instructed me. "Don't you have words that combine other words into one, much more simpler word?"

"Uh-huh sure."

"The bandersnatch is very quick, but pays no mind to small creatures such as we are currently."

"Why not?"

"Well, what sort of meal would we make?" Warren huffed. "We aren't worth the effort. If he paid us mind, he'd have nothing left to give the larger creatures."

"Oh, I see." I veered around a pebble the size of a boulder and scowled at my black dress. "Maybe I should have changed before we left. You might have warned me about the terrain."

"You did change"–he glanced at me with a frown–"you're much smaller than you were."

"I meant my clothes," I snapped.

“Oh.” Warren stopped and looked me over. “Yes, I see. Nothing to be done for it now. Perhaps we can find you something more colorful at the tea party. Come on; we're late.”

“Yes, so you've said.” I rolled my eyes. “Colorful, indeed. Yes, that's the problem with my outfit; it's not colorful enough.”

Creepy cries echoed through the woods around us, and the underbrush we journeyed through shivered as if it were afraid. I was tense, searching this strange place as we walked through it, uncertain which direction trouble would come from, but sure that it would come. Through the swaying blades of grass, I could glimpse massive tree trunks looming above us. They seemed too large to exist and made horrendous creaking noises that hurt my ears. Beetles the size of a VW bug scampered up to us, startling me, but Warren just huffed at them, and they hurried away.

“How much farther?” I asked. “You realize that I'm wearing heels?”

“Heels?” Warren narrowed his beady rabbit eyes on my feet. “Now, why would you do that?”

“I just got home from my uncle's funeral!”

“Keep your voice down,” Warren hissed. “We've only just passed the bandersnatch.”

“You said that he wouldn't bother with us.”

“You don't seem like you'd be a bother,” a voice purred from above us. “No bother at all.”

“Cat!” Warren cried. “Well met.”

“Yes, well, indeed,” the voice intensified as a feline face parted the grass to peer at me. It was a dark gray tabby with green eyes that glowed. “You two are late.”

“I keep telling her that, but she doesn't seem to hear me.”

Warren gave me an annoyed look.

“I can hear you just fine.” I rolled my eyes. “I just can't walk very well in these shoes.”

“Why did you put them on if you can't walk in them?” The cat asked.

“I didn't think I'd be walking through the woods today.”

“Hmm, not much of a planner, are you?” The cat sniffed me. “But you are a Wild, that much is certain.”

“Of course she's a Wild,” Warren snapped. “I fetched her myself. This is Alice.”

“Then I am at your service, Your Majesty,” the cat said.

“Who are you?” I asked it.

“Interesting question,” the cat murmured. “I knew who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times by then.”

“I don't need you to give me some esoteric bullshit on your inner you,” I huffed. “Just tell me who you are.”

“Do you want my name, rank, or affiliation?” The cat asked as its head turned in a complete circle.

I gaped at it until I realized that the cat was floating and his whole body had turned along with his head. Oh yes, a floating feline is so much easier to accept than a fully rotating head.

“This is insane,” I whispered. “Utter madness.”

“Don't worry about that,” the hovering cat said. “We're all mad here. I'm mad, you're mad, he's mad.”

“How do you that I'm mad?” I huffed. “We've only just

met.

“You must be, or you wouldn't have come here.”

“Oh, fantastic,” I said dryly. “And to answer your earlier question; just a name will suffice.”

“That's no fun,” the cat pouted. “How can I show off my prowess to my new queen if she doesn't allow me to give her my rank and affiliation?”

“Then why did you even ask me?”

“I was being polite.”

“Would you just tell her who you are already so that we can get on with it?” Warren grumbled.

“I am Nicholas of the Order of Cheshire, Knight of Wilds,” the cat bowed. “And I shall see you safely to tea, Queen Alice.”

“I am seeing her safely to–oh, never mind.” Warren started hopping away. “We're late enough as it is. I can't find my damn gloves either,” he kept muttering as he went.

“My uncle told me to trust Nicholas,” I said. “Is that you?”

“Yes, I knew your mother's brother well. I knew all of your family. If you will climb onto my shoulders, Your Majesty?” Nicholas said as he lowered himself before me. “I shall carry you to the rendezvous point faster than you can walk.”

“Thank you, Sir Nicholas.” I climbed onto his shoulders and took huge handfuls of fur.

“Call me Nick,” he said and shot through the air.

“Do not start the meeting without me!” Warren shouted after us.”

I clung to the flying cat as Tulgey Wood whizzed by, but soon, he was slowing down to circle a clearing. In the center of this clearing there was a little house, and in front of the house, there was a long table set haphazardly with all manner of porcelain plates, teacups, saucers, and eating implements. An enormous cake sat in the middle of the table, with smaller cakes surrounding it, and several teapots ranged down each end. Three individuals sat at around the table: a man, a brown rabbit, and a mouse.

“A mouse drinking tea,” I whispered, thinking of my uncle's stories. “The stories really are true.”

“I'm sure they are,” Nick said. “whatever you're speaking of. There's usually a grain of truth in every word uttered. It's just that sometimes you have to search harder to find it. Once you do, however, you can make some lovely bread.”

“You cannot make bread from grains of truth,” I said.

“Of course you can.” Nick smoothed his whiskers sagely. “Truth bread is the tastiest, but it can be hard to swallow.”

“Then you should eat cake!” The man at the table declared. “Where's the cake?”

“It's right in front of you, Hatter.” Nick rolled his eyes and himself, taking me along for the ride. “I prefer bread and butter.”

“Is that she?” The man asked as he stood so violently that his chair crashed backward onto the Persian carpet that had been laid over the grass.

Hatter; well, he did have a large hat on, so his name seemed appropriate. It was a garish green hat, with a paisley band about it and a flat brim. A card tucked into the band read: In this style 10/6. Whatever the hell that meant.

“Yes, this is Queen Alice,” Nick said as he floated down to the table.

“You're awfully small for a wild queen,” Hatter noted. “I seem to remember the Wilds as being much more magnificent in stature. Much more muchier. Have you lost your muchness?”

“She took some of Theodore's potion so that she could come through the gate,” Warren panted as he hopped into the clearing. Then he shifted into his human form, regaining his lost clothing, and smoothed out the wrinkled fabric. “I will rectify her size immediately.”

Warren strode over to me as I slid off of Nick's neck. He took a petite four out of his pocket and placed it on the table beside me. I stared at it in consternation.

“I don't think–” I started to say, but was cut off by Hatter.

“Then you shouldn't speak!”

I rolled my eyes and began again, “Please tell me that you don't expect me to eat all of this.”

“Of course not,” Warren cried. “You're not a pig, are you?”

“Pig!” The brown rabbit exclaimed, spilling his tea as he jerked in fright. “I hate pigs! They have a disturbing tendency of turning into babies.”

“Shut up, March Hare!” The mouse squeaked as it jolted out of its teacup. It had fallen asleep over the rim. “There aren't any pigs or babies here.”

“Oh, yes, quite right, Dormouse.” Hare settled down.

“Just take a little nibble, dear,” Dormouse said to me. “The more you eat, the bigger you get, and we don't want you squishing us.”

I followed her instruction and took a bite. Tingling spread through my body and I fell over the edge of the table as my form grew. My feet touched the ground before my butt could hit, and I

stood to my normal height.

“That's better.” I sighed. “I've imagined being little before, but that was so much worse than I'd thought it would be.”

“Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were, or might have been, was not otherwise than what you had been, would have appeared to them to be otherwise,” Hatter said sagely.

I gaped at him.

“Ah, yes, I see the resemblance now.” Hatter peered at me with dark eyes as he settled his jacket more firmly about him. “You look like your mother.”

“She does, actually,” Nick said with some surprise. “Striking resemblance.”

“Why is that shocking?” I asked the floating cat, who was paddling through the air currents on his back.

“It's not.” Nick smirked. “What's surprising is that the Mad Hatter noticed it.”

Then Nick's form shimmered like a heatwave on a highway, and the blur of his body grew. When he came into focus again, he was a sleekly muscled young man with short, dark hair stripped horizontally with gray. He wore a soldier's uniform; leather boots, cotton pants, a sword belted at his waist, and a tunic emblazoned with a small gold jester's cap on its breast.

“Your Majesty.” Nick gave me a more formal bow.

“A wild card,” I said as I noted the emblem, which was positioned inside the outline of a playing card, like a coat of arms.

“Your family's heraldic device.” Nick waved a hand to the emblem.

“A jester?” I chuckled. “How fitting. This feels like a joke.”

“Do you mean that it feels like a laugh?” Hatter asked. “Because a joke has no feeling.”

“Yes, I suppose I did.” I shrugged.

“Then you should say what you mean,” the Hare chided me.

“I do.” I scowled at the rabbit. “At least, I mean what I say– that's the same thing.”

Dear God, now they had me talking like them.

“Not the same thing a bit!” Said the Hatter. “You might as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'”

“You might just as well say that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like,'” added the March Hare.

“You might as well say,” Dormouse added as she drifted back to sleep, “that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'”

“Yes,” I agreed. “The jester is fitting because I'm surrounded by fools.”

“The fool can do anything,” Hatter said sagely, “because he doesn't know that he can't.”

“Okay, zen master,” I muttered.

“I am absolutely a master of then,” Hatter declared. “Or is it now?” His face fell.

“*Then;* it's definitely then,” Hare helped.

“No, you simpleton, it's now,” the mouse argued.

“Do you know what they're talking about?” I asked Nick as I eased away from the table.

“It's the curse,” Nick said soberly. “Hatter once tried to sing for the Queen of Hearts, and she accused him of murdering time.”

“She sentenced him to death,” Warren said as he joined us.

“Off with his head!” Hatter shouted.

“But Hatter escaped,” Nick added. “He's almost cat-like in his ability to slip away.”

“He escaped?” I lifted a brow, pointedly looking at the man who was currently trying to fit an entire slice of cake into his mouth.

“He may be insane, but it's a mad genius,” Nick said. “It's why we chose to include him in our alliance.”

“All right,” I gave in. “But what is the 'then and now' all about?”

“Time got angry that Hatter was not punished for his murder,” Warren explained.

“Excuse me?” I blinked at the serious men.

“Well, to be fair, Hatter *was* convicted,” Nick said.

“Of murdering time,” I added.

“Yes, *Father Time*,” Warren said.

“Time is a person?” I asked.

“He is a being,” Nick clarified. “But that's neither here nor there.”

“How can it not be here or there?” Hatter asked. “If it can be anywhere, it must be in one of those two places.”

“Just so,” Nick agreed and then returned to his explanation. “Time was angry that Hatter escaped, and when he confronted Hatter about it, Hatter, being Hatter, made a few jokes and recited some poetry.”

“Oh,” I murmured.

“How Doth the Little Crocodile,” Warren said.

“How doth he what?” I asked.

“No, that was the name of the poem Hatter recited.”

“I prefer Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Bat,” Hare said.

“Or The Mouse's Tale,” Dormouse added.

“Yes, both are lovely.” Warren grimaced. “But Father Time does not like poetry.”

“Time halted himself in respect to the Hatter and his favorite companions, cursing them to forever live in the hour of 6 PM.”

“Tea time,” Warren said grimly.

“Forever stuck having tea,” I said. “I would grow tired of cake.”

“Cake? I love cake!” Hatter said, splattering cake crumbs everywhere. “You can never have too much cake or tea. Though I do enjoy little sandwiches now and then.”

“What is it; now or then?” Hare asked.

“Dear me! I don't know!” Hatter declared. “I think it's forever now, but it could be forever then. How long is forever?”

“Sometimes, just a second,” Hare said.

“A second! Yes, I'll second that second,” Hatter cried as his eyes started to get larger–crazier.

“George,” a deep voice came from behind me, “easy now, old friend. You are both now and then. All the seconds are yours.”

I turned to see a hooded man walk into the clearing. He had a warrior's build and a sword buckled to his hips that cemented my initial impression. His hands were thick and calloused, but a gold signet ring adorned one of them. He walked quietly and so did the men who accompanied him. I barely noticed that they were there until they surrounded us.

“Relax,” Nick said as I tensed. “It's the King of Spades; he's on our side.”

The King of Spades laid a hand on Hatter's shoulder. Hatter–George–went still and stared up into the shadows of the hood. His eyes softened, and he calmed.

“Thank you, Jaxon,” Hatter whispered.

“Of course,” Jaxon, the King of Spades, turned to face me as he pushed back his hood.

I swallowed convulsively and prayed that I wouldn't make a fool of myself, despite it being my family crest. King Jaxon was the most gorgeous man I'd ever laid eyes on. And that includes in movies. No celebrity could hold a candle to this Card King. He had features that looked as if a love goddess had personally sculpted them to be the most perfect example of mankind. His lips were lush but not too soft, his nose was regal but not too slim, and his brow was noble but not too high. And in the middle of all of that was a pair of eyes bluer than the Pacific on a hot day.

I felt a little dizzy. Was I going to faint? Oh, please don't let me faint. That would just be the cherry on top of my sundae of

insanity.

“Queen Alice?” His voice was like honey over hot stones; sweet and steamy.

“Yes,” I squeaked, and then cleared my throat. “Yeah, that's me, I guess.”

“You guess?” His brows lifted. “You should never guess about something so important.”

“I just found out about all this today, Spade,” I growled. “Give me a fucking break.”

I nearly smacked my hand over my mouth. I had a tendency of being a bitch to attractive men. Maybe it was bitter grapes over knowing that I could never have them. Whatever it was, it was subconscious, and I had no control over it.

“Did you just call me 'Spade?'” His lips twitched.

“Yep. You want me to call you Jax instead?” I asked. “I don't know the etiquette between monarchs, and frankly, J-Spade, I don't give a damn. I've been shrunk, fell through a hole, assaulted by flowers, and forced to tromp through the woods in high heels today–my patience is wearing thin.”

King Jaxon burst out laughing, and the soldiers standing around us, dressed all in black and very menacing in appearance, stared at their king in shock. I stared at him in open longing. Laughter made him ten times hotter. Ugh, I was going to get really mean, I just knew it.

“Charming,” King Jaxon whispered. “Just like your mother.”

My face fell. I had very few memories of my mother, and they were all hazy. First Hatter had said that I resembled her, and now this guy made another reference. On top of his untouchable

hotness, it was too much. I'd just buried my last family member that very day, and I had reached my breaking point.

I turned around and walked out of the clearing.

“Alice?” Nick called after me.

“I need a minute,” I called back, waving my hand over my shoulder absently. “Don't worry, I know about the bandersnatch burrow.”

I wandered just a few feet away and found a convenient tree to lay my forehead against. The rough bark felt real, more real than this place had a right to be, and I placed my palms against it for good measure. Then a pair of strong hands folded over my shoulders. I was so startled that I swung about and flat-palmed a punch into my attacker's solar plexus.

Except he wasn't attacking me. The King of Spades had been trying to comfort me, and had not been expecting me to attack him. Nonetheless, he responded with impressive speed; deflecting my punch with his wrist, and using my momentum to pull me off balance.

I teetered, he caught me, and I wound up in his embrace, staring up into his stunning eyes. I was so close that I could see striations of indigo and amethyst in them. Jaxon stared back at me, his eyes going liquid and his arms tightening. His smell hit me then: cedar and musk. I breathed in deep.

“Duke Theodore taught you well,” he whispered, his stare falling to my lips. “But I'm your ally, Alice. I swear to you; you're safe with me.”

“I know,” my voice had dropped to a low purr. “You just startled me.”

“My apologies, Your Majesty.” He smiled. “I only wanted to offer you some comfort.”

“I'm good.” I pushed out of his arms, even though it was the last thing I wanted to do, and his eyes betrayed his disappointment for just a second. “It's been a rough day. I simply needed a few seconds to process.”

“I understand,” he said crisply. “Are you ready to return now? We have much to discuss.”

“Sure.”

I took King Jaxon's arm and let him escort me back to the Mad Tea Party.

Pronunciation Guide

Aideen: Ay-deen

Ainsley: Ains-lee

Aodh: Ee

Baobhan sith: Baa-vahn-she

Bean-sidhe: ban-she

Cailleach Bheur: Kye-luhk Burr

Dhoire: Doy-rah

Duergar: Doo-ay-gahr

Each-Uisge: Ech-oosh-kee-ya

Ewan: You-win

Fir Darrig: Fear-durg

Gancanagh: Gon-cawn-ah

Ghillie-Dhu: Gill-ee-doo

Glastig: Clee-stickh

Gradh: Grah

Gwyllion: Gwith-lee-on

Iseabal: Ish-bal

Keir: Keer

Mairte: Mahrj-tah

Maggidh: Maggie

Moire: Moy-rah

Nighean: Na-yee-in

Nuckelavee: Nuke-ah-lah-vee

Ryvel: Rival

Seelie: See-lee

Seren: Sare-rin

Sluagh: Slew-ah

Tiernan: Teer-nin

Torquil: Tore-quill

Uisdean: OOSH-jan

Unseelie: Un-see-lee

About the Author

Amy Sumida is the Internationally Acclaimed author of the Award-Winning Godhunter Series, the fantasy paranormal Twilight Court Series, the Beyond the Godhunter Series, the music-oriented paranormal Spellsinger Series, and several short stories. Her books have been translated into several languages, have made it to the top sellers list on Amazon numerous times, and the first book in her Spellsinger Series won a publishing contract with Kindle Press.

She was born and raised in Hawaii, and brings her unique island perspective to all of her books. She doesn't believe in using pen names, saving the fiction for her stories. She's know for her kick-ass heroines who always have a witty comeback ready, and her strong, supporting male characters who manage to be sensitive and alpha all at once.

Author Information

If you enjoyed this book, please let the author know by leaving a review. Reviews help her sell more books and keep her writing.

For information on new releases, detailed character descriptions, and an in-depth look into the worlds of Godhunter and the Twilight Court, check out Amy's website;

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